

**NEW**

BATTLE OF BRITAIN: CLOSE CALL FOR RAF • DESERT FOX: MASTER TACTICIAN • BATTLE OF THE BULGE: HITLER'S LAST ATTACK

# Bringing History to Life

## D-DAY:

German accounts of the bloody beaches

## HITLER'S BLITZKRIEG

Four-phase tactic brought the Nazis victory after victory

# THIRD REICH AT WAR

FROM EARLY BLITZKRIEG GLORY TO UNDIGNIFIED DEFEAT IN BERLIN



£9.99

9 772445 665014 53

### SS-TROOPS

Hitler's bodyguard fought at the front

### 10 BLUNDERS

Stubbornness cost Hitler dear

### HIMMLER'S WOLVES

Teenage Nazis killed German 'collaborators'







# THIRD REICH AT WAR

As dictator of the Third Reich, Adolf Hitler possessed a huge, well-oiled war machine, but his claim that he had more experience of war than many of his generals, because they'd never been on the front line, was probably his undoing. The Führer took active control of the military and made key operational decisions – some of which went directly against the advice of his generals. As the war dragged on, Hitler increasingly disregarded rational arguments and instead issued orders based on personal whims, paranoia and fixed ideas. The result was the downfall of Nazi Germany. Here we bring you the story of the Third Reich at war – from the triumphs of the early blitzkrieg operations to the final hour of defeat.

Enjoy the issue.





# CONTENTS

## 6 Invasion of Poland

Four eyewitnesses describe how Germany caught its neighbour unawares with a surprise attack.

## 18 Hitler's blitzkrieg

Four-phase attack surprised the enemy to secure victory for the Germans.

## 26 Battle of Britain

The Luftwaffe looked to gain air supremacy ahead of a planned invasion of Britain.

## 36 History's largest campaign

The Third Reich's panzer divisions rolled east in Operation Barbarossa.





**46** **Desert Fox**  
Strategy was  
Rommel's strongest  
weapon, and soon enemy leaders  
were among his greatest admirers.

**56** **History's  
biggest  
tank battle**  
As Germany stalled on the Eastern  
Front, Hitler targeted Kursk.

**66** **Hitler's  
supergun**  
A V-3 gun fired from  
a bunker in France could have  
razed London to the ground.

**70** **Monte Cassino**  
The Allies paid  
dearly to capture  
the summit that stood between  
them and Rome.

**78** **D-Day**  
The Germans were  
ready with their  
machine guns, but an unstoppable  
enemy came from the sea.

**88** **Himmler's  
werewolves**  
In the final days of  
the war, this corps would strike at  
both enemies and Germans alike.



**94** **Ardennes  
Offensive**  
German Eastern  
Front veterans struck west in a  
brutal, surprise offensive.

**102** **Panzerfaust**  
A simple weapon  
in the hands of  
women, children and old men was the  
Nazis last hope to stop the Soviets.

**108** **Eyewitnesses  
to the  
downfall**  
Five eyewitnesses recount the Führer's  
last hours in a bunker beneath Berlin.

**116** **Hitler's 10  
biggest  
blunders**  
The Allies won because Hitler was  
a catastrophically bad general.





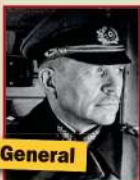
## Eyewitnesses to Poland's downfall



**Pilot**

**Franciszek Kornicki**  
(1916-2017)  
Polish Air Force pilot.  
Like the rest of Squadron 162,

he tried fight the Luftwaffe, even though the Polish fighter planes were old and slow. Later served in the RAF.



**General**

**Heinz Guderian**  
(1888-1954)  
Led the XIX Army Corps during the invasion.

Guderian perfected the new blitzkrieg tactics: the Germans' groundbreaking method of advancing with rapid units.



**Lieutenant**

**Hans von Luck**  
(1911-1997)  
Young officer who led an advanced German

reconnaissance unit that penetrated Poland from the south. Passed through Kielce, Radom, Lodz and Warsaw.



**Pianist**

**Wladyslaw Szpilman**  
(1911-2000)  
Musician on Polish national radio who experienced

the Germans' ruthless bombing of Warsaw. The Hollywood movie *The Pianist* was based on his memoirs.

ARCHIWUM FOTODZWIĘK. GETTY IMAGES & BARCH 153 866000

**German motorcycle troops formed the vanguard of the German attack in many places.**

AKG-IMAGES





# INVASION OF POLAND

*Despite Germany's military might, it was nervous of attacking Poland, which had Europe's fifth largest army. To surprise the Poles, Hitler didn't declare war, but sent his troops across the border without warning. Four eyewitnesses reveal what happened next...*

BY JEPPE NYBYE

**T**he 27-year-old German lieutenant Hans von Luck could feel the warmth of the August sunshine as he cast one last look back at the green hilltops around Bad Kissingen in central Germany and the distant Rhön mountains, where he had been skiing in the past. But von Luck was not going on holiday now – together with the rest of the troops that had been garrisoned in the town, he was marching east to Upper Silesia, which Germany had annexed earlier in the year.

Officially, von Luck was going on manoeuvres, but none of the men in their division had any doubt that their real target was Poland. Soon they would be at war. Nor was the population fooled.

“Are you going to Poland?” came the question in every town they marched through.

“Of course not, we’re going on manoeuvres,” von Luck lied in reply.

In eastern Poland, 22-year-old Franciszek Kornicki was uneasy. He was on two week’s leave, and had spent most of the time proudly parading around town in his uniform from the Polish air force. The smart clothes were a luxury for the impoverished Pole, and his whole family had admired the new threads. However, the joy was fast disappearing. The telegram in his hand had seen to that: “Report to your unit immediately,” it said. It was from the air force.

German rhetoric had hardened in recent weeks and Kornicki had known that before long it would result in

a summons for him to say goodbye to his family and go to war.

## **DAY 1** Thousands of German troops cross the Polish border

**Hans von Luck:** At 04.50 on the morning of 1st September 1939, von Luck’s division was located near Gleiwitz in eastern Germany, in sight of the Polish border. Like the rest of the invading army, von Luck had been ordered to advance into Poland at dawn. Now the soldiers rushed forward and prepared to lift the barrier at the border, but the terrified lone Polish customs officer stationed there opened it for them. Von Luck searched for the Polish army, but in vain. The countryside hadn’t yet awoken.

**Wladyslaw Szpilman:** Confused, Wladyslaw Szpilman looked at his watch. It was 06.00, and the pianist who worked at Poland’s national radio station had just been awakened by the noise of explosions. The bangs were muffled, and Szpilman assumed they must have come from ►

*Polish machine guns were silent during the first hours of the invasion. The Germans met no resistance at the border.*

APG IMAGES





outside Warsaw, probably the result of another military exercise. The musician considered going back to sleep, but then reached for a book, deciding to read before breakfast. At 08.00, Szpilman's mother opened his door. She was unusually pale. "Get up, the war...", her voice broke with the news. She cleared her throat and started again in hurried tones, "the war's begun."

Shocked, Szpilman jumped out of bed, pulled on his clothes and headed out the front door towards the radio station. Posters carrying news of the German attack were already pasted on buildings and advertising hoardings. Animated people clustered around them. Szpilman watched as a grey-haired gentleman read one of the posters. His face became blotchy as he read the announcement. "They attacked us ... without warning!" he read the

words out loud, his voice filled with indignation. "Really, this is no way to behave." He read the announcement through once more, as though scarcely

*"Danzig is German" was a Nazi slogan in the years leading up to the war.*

GETTY IMAGES



## Poland's strategy was based on a misunderstanding

Everyone knew that Germany was militarily superior, but the Poles expected France to come to their aid within 12 days.

**T**he Poles only expected to hold out for a few weeks before France came to their aid, and based their tactics on that premise. France, however, believed that Poland would resist for three or four months, and planned to attack Germany during that time. The upshot was that Poland was quickly overrun.

The misunderstanding arose in May 1939, when the Polish Minister of Defence, Tadeusz Kasprzycki, negotiated an agreement with

France's military leaders, obliging them to attack Germany if Hitler invaded Poland. On his return from the talks, Kasprzycki informed his government that France would mobilise immediately in the event of a German incursion and launch a large-scale attack 12 days later.

The agreement was never approved by the French politicians, however, who would only agree to a minor attack to occupy Saarland in western Germany. Unfortunately, this change was never communicated to the Poles.

believing what he had seen, then walked away shaking his head.

**Heinz Guderian:** All along the Polish border, the picture was the same: tanks and motorised infantry were advancing unchecked. General Guderian was in the vanguard, leading XIX Army Corps through north-west Poland. Suddenly, a shell landed 50 metres ahead of the general's command vehicle, spewing up earth. Moments later, another shell came hissing down, landing 50 metres behind. Reckoning that the next would be a direct hit, Guderian ordered his driver to turn about and drive off, but the unnerved driver

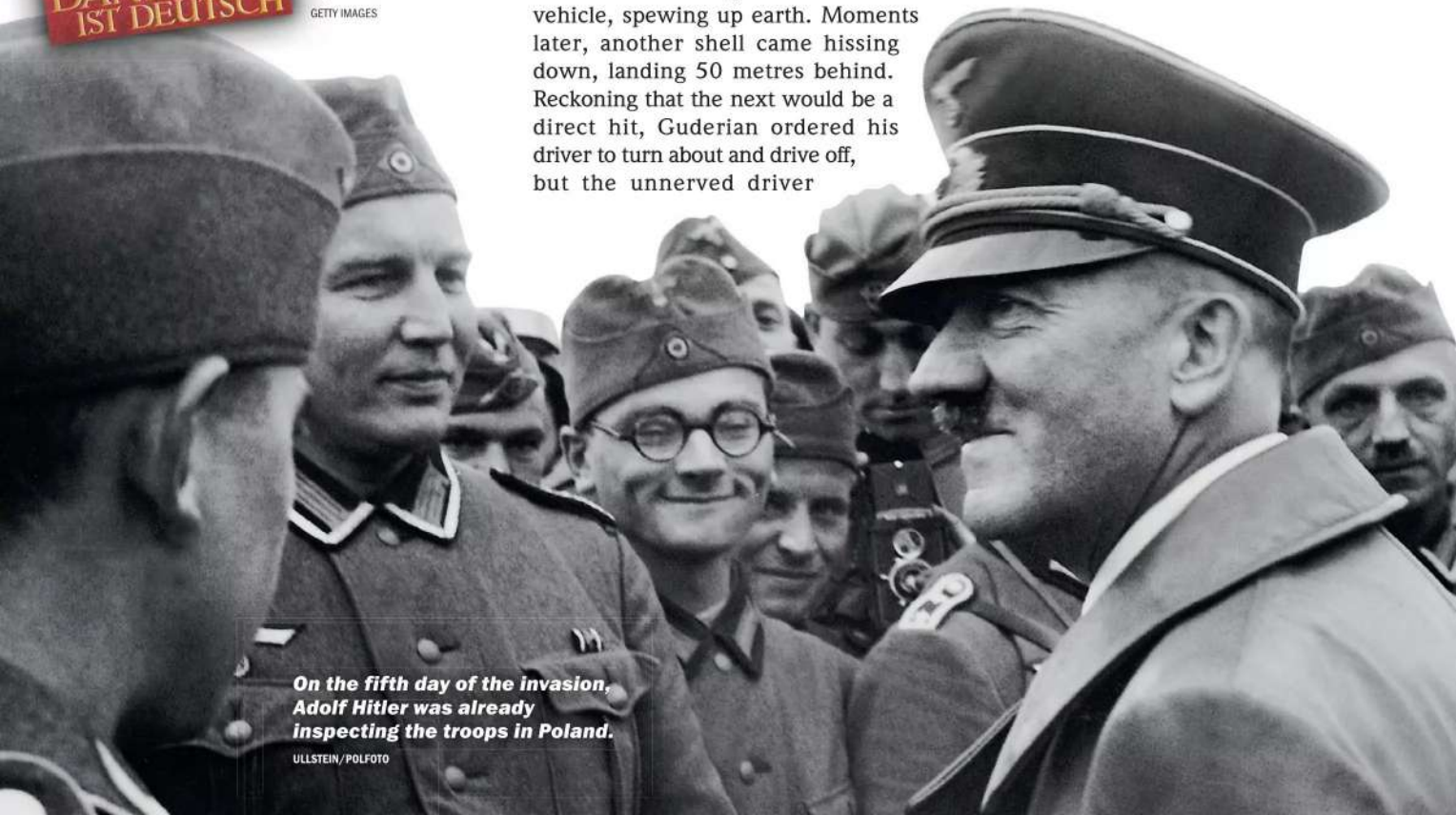
soon lost control and crashed headlong into a ditch at full speed.

The car's armour didn't save it, and Guderian was forced to abandon the wreck and make his way on foot back to headquarters. It was not the most auspicious start for the brains behind Nazi Germany's armoured forces.

Guderian quickly requisitioned a new vehicle and headed for the front

*On the fifth day of the invasion, Adolf Hitler was already inspecting the troops in Poland.*

ULLSTEIN/POLFO







French troops occupy the German city of Lauterbach in Saarland. 9th September.

WW2INCOLOR

line again. In his absence, the Germans' advance had stopped at the River Brda, the officers apparently having forgotten their orders to cross the river quickly. Quizzing the officers present, an angry Guderian received a report that the river could not be taken that day, but events were moving rapidly and before long, news came that the enemy on the far bank were weak and better still from a German perspective, a bridge had been taken that could be used to cross the river.

A delighted Guderian headed towards the bridge. Upon his arrival, he saw a group of staff officers sheltering behind a wide, old oak tree, which lay around a hundred metres from the water. The Poles hidden in trenches on the far bank were under sustained but ineffective fire from German tanks. Guderian immediately put a stop to the pointless shelling and instead ordered the tanks to cross the bridge. The Polish bicycle infantry were its only defenders and after a brief skirmish they were forced to surrender.

**Hans von Luck:** In the south, Lieutenant von Luck and his company from the 7th Panzer Division's reconnaissance battalion had penetrated a full 15 kilometres into Poland. Their task was to identify targets that could be destroyed with focussed air strikes and artillery fire, but so far they still hadn't

met any enemy forces – in fact, their advance had been more like a peacetime exercise than an invasion into hostile territory. The illusion didn't last. Scouting a forested area, they were met by flaming machine guns and mortar shells. Shrapnel ripped through the greenery and triggered a rain of leaves and branches.

Von Luck felt queasy. None of the countless exercises he had participated in had prepared him to be the target of direct fire, without cover, and in the middle of an inferno of exploding shells and hammering machine guns.

Armoured scout cars began to provide covering fire, but just as von Luck was about to order his company forward, one of his men was killed by machine gun fire. Von Luck felt a stinging anxiety, but shouted to his men: "No. 1 and No. 2 platoons attack."

No one moved. The men were terrified of death and instead of obeying stared at their lifeless companion. Von Luck knew that he must overcome his fear and lead the attack.

"Everyone, follow me," he shouted, running forward. Much to the lieutenant's relief, the men did as they were ordered. However, a massive bout of shelling soon forced them into cover.

As darkness descended, the division's commander decided it was too dangerous to try to rush the Polish positions. Instead, armoured vehicles and artillery began a relentless overnight bombardment of the Poles.

"It was a lurid scene," according to von Luck, with tracer bullets drawing colourful lines across the night sky.

**Heinz Guderian:** Guderian knew that the first day of battle always had its share of nervousness, but even he was momentarily speechless when the commander of the 2nd (Motorised) Division reported that he had been compelled to withdraw due to an attack by Polish cavalry. According to Guderian's memoirs, once he regained his voice, he asked the officer "if he had ever heard of Pomeranian grenadiers being

## MYTH

**The Polish army's weapons were old and ineffective**  
Poland's Wz 35 anti-tank rifle was a big hit with the Nazis after Poland's fall. The Germans renamed it as the **Panzerbüchse 35** and even sold 800 to Mussolini's army.



broken by hostile cavalry. [The officer] replied that he had not and now assured me that he could hold his positions."

## DAY 2 Poland's old fighter jets are hopelessly slow

**Franciszek Kornicki:** Kornicki cursed his obsolete fighter as another German plane escaped him over the city of Lodz. No sooner did he get a German fighter in his sights than it was gone again – and at lightning speed.

With a top speed of 330 km/h, Poland's PZL P.7 had been a fearsome weapon in the early 1930s, but Kornicki knew it was no match for his opponent's state-of-the-art Messerschmitt Bf-109 fighter, which could travel at 640 km/h.

Suddenly – by pure chance – the German flew into his line of fire. Determined, Kornicki squeezed the trigger and fired a short volley, but when he tried to shoot again, his machine gun jammed. Quickly, Kornicki bashed it back into life and manoeuvred his P.7 into a new attacking spot.

Having gained a favourable position, the Pole was expecting to down the plane – his first 'kill'. But as he rolled upside down and dove towards the tail of the German plane, his seat harness broke and Kornicki fell out of his plane, which then crashed to the ground. Fortunately, Kornicki's parachute ►



Polish cavalry came close to routing a German panzer division.

BRIDGEMAN



# Poland was attacked from all sides

On 1st September 1939, German troops attacked from the north, south and west. Poland's only hope was to hold out until its allies arrived.

An overwhelming force of 1.5 million German troops along with 50,000 allied Slovaks penetrated Poland's borders at the start of September. Faced with modern tanks and a superior air force, Poland's defence collapsed with frightening speed. After just five days of fighting, the Poles were pushed back to the Vistula River, which had previously been earmarked as the country's last defence.

Nazi propaganda declared that the Poles were beaten by the 18th day – the 17th of September – when 170,000 Polish soldiers surrendered and the remainder of Poland's army was squeezed into difficult terrain in

the south-eastern region of the country. That same day, the Soviet Union attacked the desperate Poles from the east, and the defending forces were forced to flee across the border into neutral Romania.

After 18 days, the war was effectively over. German and Soviet troops just had to snuff out odd pockets of resistance. Warsaw held out until 27th September, while the city of Kock finally fell after 36 days of war. The remaining Poles were forced to accept the bitter truth that their allies would never come.

## 2 German army invades

At 04.45 The army invades German troops cross the border from the west, south and north. The goal is to enclose the Polish army in a pincer manoeuvre.

### German tactics



Nazi Germany's military budget was 30 times the size of Poland's and it had used it to build one of the most modern armies in the world. However, the German generals feared being trapped in a two-pronged war, as had happened in World War I. It was therefore vital to defeat Poland in record time, so that they could move west quickly to fend off a possible French attack.



Men:	1,500,000
Guns:	5,800
Tanks:	2,600
Aircraft:	2,150
Dead:	16,000
Wounded:	32,000

### Polish tactics



Although Poland boasted Europe's fifth largest army, it was far from ready for war. Before the invasion, the Polish generals believed they could hold the Germans in check until 1940. Their aim was to try to prolong the war by gradually retreating towards the River Wisla, where they would dig in. The slow withdrawal would buy France time to attack Germany from the west.



Men:	700,000
Guns:	2,000
Tanks:	615
Aircraft:	400
Dead:	65,000
Wounded:	130,000
Captured:	685,000

### Soviet tactics



Stalin had purged large sections of the Red Army's officer corps in 1937 and 1938, which meant that it wasn't really ready for war. The generals also believed that the Germans would take months to defeat Poland. But when Germany quickly overran the Poles, the Soviet Union had to rapidly launch its own invasion to secure its share of the country.



Men:	465,000
Guns:	unknown
Tanks:	3,700
Aircraft:	2,000
Dead:	1,000
Wounded:	2,400

worked. As he slowly descended to the ground, he thought about how to tell his superiors that he had lost a plane.

Kornicki knew that any aircraft – even an outdated one – was invaluable in the fight against the Luftwaffe, which possessed five times as many aircraft.

**Hans von Luck:** During the night, the Poles who had caused von Luck's

division so many problems disappeared. The lieutenant now stared at their abandoned position, which looked like a scene from a horror movie. Dead Poles and horses lay mingled together in a single bloody tangle. The deserted houses were still burning. It was the same depressing vision in each of the villages von Luck's men passed through over the next two days. The Luftwaffe

had cleared a bloody path for his division with brutal efficiency.

## DAY 3 The Polish army is pushed back everywhere

**Franciszek Kornicki:** Kornicki was now at the air base in Lodz, where he was working as a liaison officer. His task was to sort through the reports of enemy activity and notify his





### 1 First shot of the war

At 04.00 on 1st September the battleship *Schleswig-Holstein* fires the first shot of the war as it begins its bombardment of the Polish fort of Westerplatte at the entrance to the free city of Danzig.

### 3 Polish army flees

On 7th September, German tanks stand on the outskirts of Warsaw. The Polish commander-in-chief fears he will be surrounded in the capital, and moves his headquarters to Brest.

### 4 Soviet Union attacks

On 17th September, Poland is unexpectedly attacked from the East. Most of the Polish army is busy fighting the Germans, so the Red Army encounters little resistance but still suffers relatively heavy losses.

### 5 Meeting in the middle

On 22nd September, the German and Soviet armies meet in the city of Lviv. The men celebrate with cigarettes.



Soviet officer talks to his German counterpart.

### 6 Last Polish soldiers surrender

After a four-day battle near the town of Kock, the Germans capture 170,000 prisoners of war. All resistance in Poland has been definitively crushed.



Polish prisoners of war are led away under guard.

BRIDGEMAN



### Before the invasion

**A Danzig:** World War I cost Germany this key port city, which came under League of Nations protection.

**B East Prussia:** The Treaty of Versailles cut the province of East Prussia off from the rest of Germany.

**C The Polish Corridor:** Poland regained its sovereignty after World War I and gained access to the Baltic Sea via the Polish Corridor through Germany.

**D Slovakia:** Became a German vassal in 1939, giving Hitler's men free access.

### After the invasion

**E F Poland divided:** A pact between Germany and the Soviet Union divided Poland. Germany annexed Danzig and the entire west of Poland, the Soviets claimed the eastern half.

squadron of any German formations within their strike range. The Poles were under pressure everywhere and Kornicki was busy.

**Wladyslaw Szpilman:** With disbelief, Szpilman listened to the news. He had expected that the Polish army would quickly drive the enemy back: according to government propaganda,

the German tanks were made of cardboard and ran on fuel that wasn't fit for a cigarette lighter. But now German soldiers – who according to the same propaganda could only be equipped with paper clothes – were grinding down all resistance. The government's lies were almost unbearable, but Szpilman had not yet given up hope: Rumour had it that ►



TOP/PHOTO/POLO/PHOTO



Poland's tanks were dangerous adversaries but the country had far too few to stop the invasion.



Hitler's invasion of Poland triggered World War II.

GETTY IMAGES

an outdated P.7 fighter was a welcome vehicle – a plane was a plane, after all.

The joy, however, was short-lived. At noon, three German bombers appeared, and Kornicki and three other pilots scrambled aboard their fighters. The other three aircraft started immediately,

but Kornicki's plane emitted a cough, then nothing. The engine was dead. Frustrated, Kornicki climbed out of his so-called fighter and watch from the ground as his comrades shot down the three German bombers.

Kornicki's mood worsened later that day, as he drove towards the town of Widzew to pick up another plane for his squadron. Beside the road lay the result of the three German bombing missions earlier in the day: several wrecked vehicles and seven dead comrades.

Britain and France would declare war on Germany at any moment.

Suddenly, the Polish national anthem interrupted the radio programme and the announcer declared that Poland was no longer alone: Britain had declared war on Germany. Szpilman's mother had tears in her eyes and his otherwise proud father was crying without shame.

## DAY 5 Hitler inspects the troops together with Guderian

**Heinz Guderian:** During the first five days of the war, the Germans had gone from victory to victory. Guderian was now seated next to Adolf Hitler who had come on an unannounced visit to witness the army's progress for himself. The pair were being driven in Hitler's car. Near the town of Graudenz, in northern Poland, the car stopped at the broken bridges over the River Wisla.

Hitler stared impressed at a ruined Polish artillery position.

"Our dive bombers did that?" he asked. Guderian noted Hitler's surprise on learning that it was the work of tanks. Hitler then asked about the casualty figures so far. Guderian responded: 150 dead and 700 wounded. Hitler seemed pleased: in World War I his unit had lost 2,000 men on the first day. At sunset, the Führer left Poland.

## DAY 6 German bombers destroy Poland from the air

**Franciszek Kornicki:** Although Kornicki's squadron had been forced to retreat to the town of Drwalew, near Warsaw, the young pilot was feeling elated. Camouflaged, at the edge of a forest, lay a plane that had been assigned to him. At last, he could rejoin the fight. After being grounded for so long, even

## DAY 7 The government is forced to flee the capital, Warsaw

**Wladyslaw Szpilman:** Just before dawn, someone banged on the door of the Szpilmans' flat. Outside stood their neighbour with a rucksack. He was leaving, but before he went, he wanted to warn the Szpilmans that the Germans were approaching Warsaw. The

# Armoured trains protected Poles

Polish roads were in poor condition, so heavy artillery was transported to the front using special armoured trains. It proved to be an inadequate solution.

**D**uring World War I the armoured train had been an important weapon that had spread fear among enemy troops. However, when Germany invaded Poland in 1939, the trains quickly became obsolete. The Polish army in particular

used armoured trains and had as many as ten at the beginning of the war. Instead of passenger carriages, the armoured trains had artillery cars with gun turrets and

several machine guns. The guns were especially effective against German tanks, which were protected only by a thin layer of armour. On the other hand, the trains were vulnerable to air strikes by German dive bombers. The Luftwaffe could also destroy the train tracks. Four out of ten Polish trains were put out of play in this way by German air strikes.



The armoured train Danuta fought for 16 days before taking a direct hit.

BARCH B 206 BILD-GD-52



government had left the city, and all healthy men were to head down to the army's new line of defence along the eastern bank of the Vistula River.

Szpilman quickly made up his mind to stay in the city: if he was going to die, he would rather do so at home protecting his family. At 08.00 Szpilman left the flat. The city was transformed. The shops were all shuttered up and no trams were running. Dozens of cars filled the streets instead. Each was full and driving at top speed towards Wisla.

Scattered groups of soldiers were marching through the streets, not in a disciplined way, but with a defiant air. Reading their expressions, Szpilman sensed that they were no longer being governed by a functioning military machine but were advancing towards the enemy on their own initiative.

#### **DAY 9** Poles barricade themselves in the capital

**Wladyslaw Szpilman:** On the outskirts of Warsaw, Szpilman joined thousands of other volunteers in digging ditches to stop the German tanks. He was working in the middle of a park and Szpilman believed the task would have been quite pleasant without the German artillery. Luckily, the shells were landing a good distance away, but the knowledge that he could die in an instant was uncomfortable.

The capital of Poland was being surrounded by heavy German units at an alarming rate.

#### **DAY 15** The Polish army tries to escape the Germans

**Franciszek Kornicki:**

Frustrated that he had spent more time on the ground than in the air, Kornicki was now a passenger in his commander's car. He knew matters could be worse, however, and at least fuel had been secured for the trip. His unit had received no petrol for the past six days.

The whole Polish army was on the run from the relentless German advance, and

Kornicki's group didn't dare to stop for food until they were a good 300 kilometres south-east of Warsaw, in the town of Hrubieszów. The place was close to the village where Kornicki grew up, so instead of spending time eating, he traced some old acquaintances and gave them money to send to his family. Shortly afterwards, the awful journey continued east. The driver was constantly falling asleep at the wheel and had to be shaken awake by his terrified passengers.

#### **DAY 16** Friendly fire delayed the German capture of Brest

**Wladyslaw Szpilman:** The dusty air was hard to breathe. The ceiling in the cellar seemed about to collapse at any moment and bury its involuntary occupants in a mountain of rubble. Szpilman found it unbearable, and wondered whether it would be possible to stay in their third-floor flat, but he knew that the bombs whistling past their shattered windows would make that too dangerous now that the Germans

#### **MYTH**

#### **No Polish planes flew during the first day of the war**

The day before the invasion, Poland moved many of its planes to makeshift runways, helping them avoid being destroyed when the airfields were bombed and so join battle immediately.



bombers had resumed their raids after a break of several days.

**Heinz Guderian:** In eastern Poland, Guderian's troops had encircled the city of Brest, while Polish forces were entrenched in the city's castle, trying to stave off inevitable defeat. The day before, the Poles had blocked an attack by placing a burnt-out tank in the castle's entrance, but Guderian expected victory soon. The Germans had sent armoured personnel carriers ►

**A German Heinkel He 111 bomber prepares to drop its destructive payload on a Polish city.**

BRIDGEMAN





## MYTH

### German army was fully motorised

The German army was the most motorised in Europe with thousands of vehicles, yet horses were of vital importance. Each German division had as many as 5,400 horses for transporting troops and supplies.



SHUTTERSTOCK

forward – with infantry behind. The soldiers watched the Poles run for cover as the shells rained down, then dashed forward, unhindered, towards the enemy positions. The outermost ramparts fell quickly, but then the attack lost momentum. Guderian who was on the front line himself, suddenly found himself being shelled: his own artillery were no longer firing ahead of the Germans – but in the middle of them.

Horried, Guderian quickly ordered his adjutant back to redirect the artillery's support fire, but a Polish sniper's bullet mortally wounded him before he could relay the orders. The Germans were forced to withdraw from the castle. Their losses were staggering.

### DAY 17 Soviet Union stabs Poland in the back

**Franciszek Kornicki:** Long lines of military vehicles were snaking towards the border town of Zalizhchyky in south-east Poland. In one of the cars – a brand-new Opel – sat a shocked Kornicki, who was still trying to digest the Soviet Union's "treachery" that had seen them launch an invasion earlier that day.

The Soviets had made a secret pact with their ideological arch-enemy, the Nazis, to partition Poland. Kornicki decided there and then that both the Nazis and the Communists had to be fought at all costs. First, however, he had to reach Romania, where the last of the Polish army had been ordered.

Kornicki had intended to fly there, but his plane had been taken "by an enterprising pilot in a hurry", so Kornicki was forced to make the arduous journey to the frontier by road.

Despite their fancy wheels, progress was painfully slow. The situation worsened as night fell when they encountered a stream of vehicles ►

# Hitler's weapon of terror

The newly developed Stuka was accurate and could terrorise the enemy with its siren. In Poland, the plane proved its worth.

**J**unkers Ju 87 was the world's first *Sturzkampfflugzeug* (dive bomber). The name was a bit of a mouthful even for the Germans and they quickly began referring to these type of aircraft as Stukas. The Luftwaffe received its first Stukas in 1936. The plane was slow, but this allowed it to attack with great precision because the pilot could get very close to his target before releasing his bombs. Even an inexperienced pilot could expect a direct hit on every fourth attempt. By comparison, a Heinkel He 111 bomber was lucky to hit his target with one in 50 bombs.

During the Battle of the Bzura River in central Poland, the Stuka showed its strength. On 10th September, German infantry surrounded an entire Polish division. The howling Stukas dived over the encircled Poles again and again. After nine days of uninterrupted bombardment, the Poles surrendered. Hitler's howling weapons of terror had cleared away another obstacle and victory was within reach.

### Bomb for smaller targets

Under each wing sat two bombs, each weighing up to 50 kg.



### Wing design improved visibility

The plane's wings sloped down slightly where they abutted the cockpit, then sloped upwards. This enabled the pilot to see targets on the ground.

### Powerful bomb

The trapeze mount under the cockpit could carry a 500 kg bomb.

### The Stuka couldn't venture too close

German pilot Hermann Neumann destroyed 68 tanks from his Stuka during World War II. He learned early on the importance of banking away quickly after attacking a ground target.

"After we fired our cannons, we would go to the right or left, but we did not directly fly over the tank. One time a Sergeant Ott was shooting at a ... KV-2 heavy tank ... but nothing happened ... So he

went down again and when he was very close ... it exploded. The turret flew over his canopy. When we got back to the base he was [still] shaking."



WERNERHILTON



### Main weapon viewer

A glass plate in the floor enabled the pilot to see when it was time to drop the bomb.

### Gunner covered the tail

The rear gunner had a 7.92-mm machine gun to prevent fighters attacking from behind.

### Fuel tanks

Each tank could hold 240 litres of petrol. In total, the plane carried enough fuel to travel 790 kilometres.

### 1,200 shots per minute

Each wing had a machine gun operated by the pilot.

### Siren scared the enemy

When the Stuka dived, two air-powered propellers made sirens on the plane howl. The sound was supposed to scare the enemy.

### Flew with the wheels down

The landing gear wasn't retractable, so wheel "spats" were used to improve aerodynamics.

## Vertical dives improved accuracy

### 1 Spots target

From an altitude of up to eight kilometres, the pilot identifies the target.

### 2 Dives

He immediately pushes the nose down towards the target and dives.

### 3 Drops bomb

100-300 meters above the goal, the pilot drops the bomb, which continues at 400 km/h.

### 4 Quickly departs

The pilot banks away and quickly climbs to avoid debris from the explosion.

## Junkers Ju 87B-1



Top speed	340 km/h.
Maximum range:	790 km
Maximum altitude:	8,000 m
Weight:	2,710 kg
Weight (loaded):	4,340 kg
Wingspan:	13.8 m
Length:	11.1 m
Height:	4.01 m
Wing area:	31.9 m <sup>2</sup>
Horsepower:	1,200
Engine:	Junkers Jumo 211
Machine Guns:	3 x 7.92 mm
Bombs:	500 kg



coming towards them from the border. The fleeing people shouted that the Red Army was only few miles down the road. "Turn back and aim for the border bridge at Kutý," they cried

Depressed, Kornicki and his fellow passengers turned the Opel around.

**Heinz Guderian:** The Germans had finally occupied the castle at Brest, but Guderian was still annoyed. A young Red Army officer had just demanded that Guderian give up the hard-fought city. According to the officer, Brest had to be surrendered to the Red Army in five days on account of the pact the Hitler and Stalin had agreed.

It wasn't the deal that irked Guderian, but the deadline. How was he supposed to transport wounded men and damaged tanks back to German territory in so short a time? A fuming Guderian was certain that no soldier would have made such an impractical deal.

## **DAY 18** The Polish army flees across the border into Romania

**Franciszek Kornicki:** It was after midnight when Kornicki and his fellow pilots reached Kutý. There was a long queue to cross, and the men struggled to stay awake as they waited. They didn't even notice a thief stealing the car's spare tyre from the back of the vehicle. Kornicki didn't mind. He figured that the thief's need was greater than theirs.



*A heavy German mortar is pulled into position for the bombing of Warsaw.*

Finally, the column inched forward and they crossed the border into Romania.

**Hans von Luck:** With the exception of a few pockets of resistance in Warsaw, the Polish forces throughout the country had given up the fight. Von Luck no longer needed protection to scout the area – he simply drove wherever he wanted to go with an interpreter and an orderly. Near a small village, they met a uniformed young woman, who aimed a sub-machine gun at them. But before she could fire, they overpowered her.

"Do you belong to a women's battalion, or are you a partisan?" von Luck asked. The woman didn't reply. Her eyes shone with hatred. She led the three Germans towards a house. As they entered, von Luck saw a Polish officer – seemingly, the woman's husband – lying wounded. They quickly put the couple in the car and transported

them to a German field hospital, where the man was treated.

Upon their arrival, the woman thanked them. They were the first words she had uttered, but her next words carried a sting: "Why can't you let us live in peace? Now the Russians will come, your allies, and hated by us. But Poland is not lost yet."

## **DAY 21** Death and destruction pervade the streets of Warsaw

**Wladyslaw Szpilman:** Dead people and horses littered the streets and flames consumed entire neighbourhoods. The bombing had destroyed the waterworks, so there was no way to stop the fire. German artillery was blasting all strategically important buildings in the capital, and every time the radio began to broadcast, the Germans respond with a heavy bombardment. Szpilman no longer felt safe anywhere.

## **DAY 22** Germany and the Soviet Union celebrate Poland's capture

**Heinz Guderian:** Luckily, the Soviet General Semyon Krivoshein spoke a little French, enabling he and Guderian to agree the surrender of Brest in a civilized manner. Krivoshein gave Guderian all the time needed to withdraw in good order. Only supplies taken from the Poles had to remain. Guderian was relieved. For him, the Polish campaign was now over. He



*The inhabitants of Warsaw dug trenches and tank defences as the Germans approached the capital.*

GRANGER/POLFO



hoped that having seen the speed of the Germans' victory, France and Britain would now see sense and make peace.

#### **DAY 23** Guns silence the radio in Warsaw

**Wladyslaw Szpilman:** Again, Szpilman ran to work, dashing forward in the moments when the hiss of shells could not be heard. At the station, the pianist was asked to play Chopin. It was the last piece of live music that the Polish national radio station ever played. As Szpilman let his hands dance on the piano, the shells came ever closer. He could barely hear what he was playing.

#### **DAY 25** Stuka dive bombers spread death and terror

**Wladyslaw Szpilman:** Deafening explosions mixed with the nerve-racking howls of Stukas. The Germans had launched a massive air raid to force Warsaw to surrender. Szpilman, back home, sheltered in a tiny room that housed a lavatory with ten other people.

#### **DAY 28** Germans are more popular than the Soviets

**Hans von Luck:** Von Luck deftly avoided another pile of rubble in one of Warsaw's bombed-out suburbs. The Polish capital had fallen the day before, and the lieutenant was reflecting on the campaign. He felt particularly proud of the tailor in his company. Back in Bad Kissingen, in Germany, the other soldiers had teasingly called him "our little tailor," but during the campaign he had surpassed them all for bravery in his role as a runner.

Under heavy artillery fire, while everyone else took cover, the little tailor had run back and forth relaying messages and orders between the front line and the officers stationed further back. As far as von Luck was concerned, the tailor had fully deserved the medal he'd been awarded.

Further inside Warsaw, the houses were still standing, and everyday life was slowly starting again. Von Luck found a cosy café inside one of the city's fashionable hotels, where he ordered himself a drink.

The drama of the war seemed distant. He had the strange sense that nothing had happened. The Germans were clearly far more welcome in Poland than the Soviets, von Luck decided.

#### **DAY 29** Warsaw's citizens are left with burning ruins and starvation

**Wladyslaw Szpilman:** Although Warsaw had surrendered two days earlier, Szpilman hadn't dared to go out into the city streets until now. The sight that met him was deeply depressing. There were barricades of overturned trams and torn-up paving slabs at every street corner. Everywhere there were piles of decaying corpses, both of men and horses, which starving people fell upon for food. Embers still smouldered in many of the ruined buildings.

Szpilman watched two men in foreign uniforms pass by on a motorbike. Both seem relaxed as they shouted "Marschallstrasse! Marschallstrasse!" to a startled boy. Szpilman guessed they wanted directions to Marszalkowska Street, but the child was baffled. The pair finally lost patience and moved on. They were the first Germans Wladyslaw Szpilman had ever seen.

#### **MYTH**

#### **Cavalry attacked tanks with swords and lances**

This myth was created by German propaganda. Polish cavalry rode to the front, but then fought on foot.



SHUTTERSTOCK

*On 6th October, after 36 days of fighting, Nazi Germany defeated the last Polish forces. Poland was divided in two and wiped from the map. Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union each now occupied their own part of the country, just as they had agreed beforehand.*

#### **FURTHER READING**

• Hans von Luck: *Panzer Commander – The memoirs of Hans von Luck*, Frontline Books, 2013 • Franciszek Kornicki: *The Struggle*, Stratus Books, 2008 • David G Williamson: *Poland Betrayed*, Pen & Sword, 2009 • Wladyslaw Szpilman: *The Pianist*, Phoenix Paperback, 2000

## Poles continued to fight

**Defeat by Germany did not make the Polish army give up. Thousands of soldiers fled to France and Britain to continue the fight.**

**A**pproximately 100,000 Polish troops escaped across the border to Romania and sailed from the neutral country's ports to France. In 1940, 75,000 Polish soldiers took part in the fight against Nazi Germany but when France also fell, they retreated to Britain.

During the Battle of Britain, from 10th July to 31st October 1940, battle-hardened Polish pilots played a vital role. Although the Poles made up only five per cent of RAF pilots, they

accounted for 12 per cent of the victories during the Battle of Britain, shooting down 203 of the 1,736 planes that the Germans lost.

The Polish navy was evacuated shortly before the German invasion of Poland. It went to Britain, where it later took part in the sinking of the German battleship *Bismarck*. With the influx of Polish deserters from the German army along with released POWs, the Polish army in exile grew to 250,000 men during the war.



*Polish pilots had their own Spitfire squadrons in Britain.*



THIRD REICH AT WAR

# Hitler's BLITZ

## forces Europe to its knees

BY MORTEN RENDSMARK At the beginning of World War II, Germany had fewer tanks, soldiers and aircraft than France and Britain. However, Prussian General Heinz Guderian had, with Hitler's approval, developed a groundbreaking military tactic: blitzkrieg. The tactics' **four phases of attack** made Germany's armoured divisions invincible during the early years of the war.

Heavy German  
artillery shelled Soviet  
defences on the  
Eastern Front in 1942.

BPK



# KRIEG



## Soften up the enemy

- Artillery guns launch a bombardment against the weakest point in the enemy's position
- Dive-bombers take out enemy tanks and defences

**O**n 12th May 1940, Stuka bombers swarmed over the French trenches near the town of Sedan. Germany's invasion of France was in full swing. The air reverberated to the sounds of explosions and the howling sirens of dive-bombers plunging almost vertically before releasing their 250-kilogram bombs. The French soldiers at Sedan had unknowingly become the victims of history's greatest air raid to date – and the Germans' new blitzkrieg style of war.

The sounds of Stuka sirens shredded the nerves of the soldiers on the ground. Suddenly, at 15.30, the noise from the screaming Stukas

was drowned out by the thunder of hundreds of German artillery guns opening fire. This devastating bombardment rained destruction on what was left of the French trenches.

The shells shredded barbed wire and smashed the defenders' bunkers. German planes and guns spent the next 30 minutes systematically bombing the French lines.

At 16.00, the guns fell silent. The first phase of the Germans' new lightning war was over – German reconnaissance units would now probe the defences, searching for the weakest point in the destabilised French positions.



### BOMBER

The German Ju 87 Stuka had propeller-driven sirens that screamed when the plane entered its deadly dive.

**Role:** Attacked ground targets. Wasn't suited to air combat.

**Speed:** Had a maximum speed of 408 km/h.

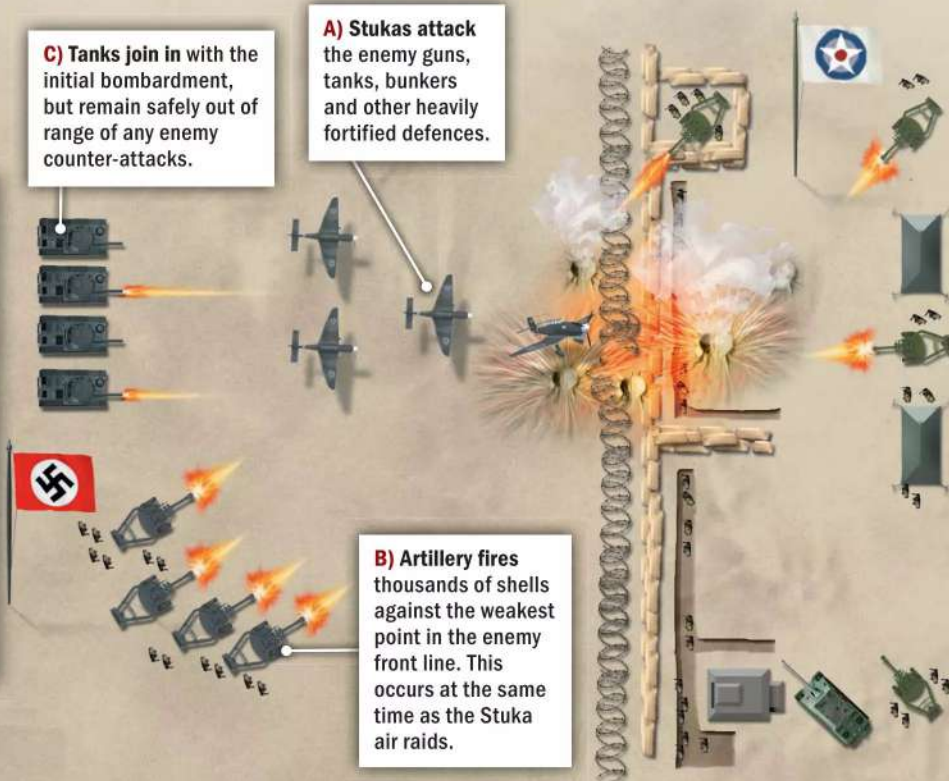
**Payload:** 1 x 250-kg below and 4 x 50-kg bombs on the wings.

**Range:** Between 800 and 1,165 km depending on the type.

**C) Tanks join in with the initial bombardment, but remain safely out of range of any enemy counter-attacks.**

**A) Stukas attack the enemy guns, tanks, bunkers and other heavily fortified defences.**

**B) Artillery fires thousands of shells against the weakest point in the enemy front line. This occurs at the same time as the Stuka air raids.**







# Pierce the enemy line

- Large tank groups penetrate the weakest point in the enemy's defence
- Soldiers in fast tracked vehicles protect the tanks from flank attacks

**T**wo days after the barrage at Sedan, on 14th May 1940, General Heinz Guderian's 2nd Panzer Army blazed through the French barbed wire at Sedan. The day before, engineering troops in personnel carriers had declared that this was the weakest point in the French line – and now the heavy tanks were rolling through what was left of the enemy's fortifications.

The 200 attacking tanks churned up the ground and made the French trenches shake. Exhausted after the bombardment and demoralised by the Stukas' sirens, the French troops fled in panic. France's army commanders

desperately tried to summon reserves to plug the widening gap in the line, but the thousands of panicking soldiers were creating chaos on the roads, and France's heavy tanks became stuck in the jam. Meanwhile, the German tanks rolled steadfastly on through the kilometre-wide gap and German foot soldiers established defensive positions with mortars and anti-tank guns.

For the French, all manoeuvres were now in vain. The Germans had penetrated the massive defences at Sedan, and tanks and soldiers in fast-moving vehicles swarmed out across the front and into the French summer landscape beyond.



## TANK

At the start of World War II, the 15-tonne Panzer II tank formed the backbone of Germany's victorious armoured divisions.

**Role:** Penetrated the enemy line quickly and efficiently.

**Weaponry:** Two 20-mm guns and one 7.92-mm machine gun.

**Speed:** The 140-hp engine gave a top speed of 40 km/h.

**Armour:** The tank's armour plating was 14.5-mm thick.



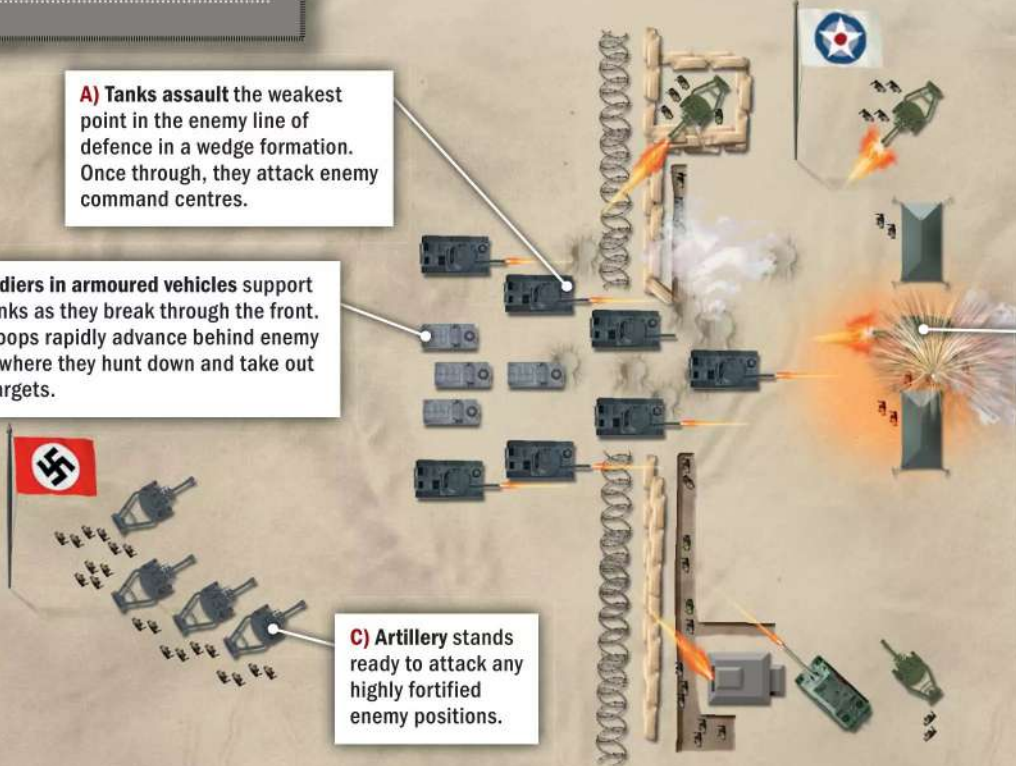
Specially trained infantry in armoured cars storm a Polish position during the campaign in 1939. Earlier shelling set large parts of the settlement on fire.

**A) Tanks assault the weakest point in the enemy line of defence in a wedge formation. Once through, they attack enemy command centres.**

**B) Soldiers in armoured vehicles support the tanks as they break through the front. The troops rapidly advance behind enemy lines, where they hunt down and take out new targets.**

**C) Artillery stands ready to attack any highly fortified enemy positions.**

**D) The enemy's headquarters are relatively unprotected and vulnerable behind the front line. Artillery guns and supplies are also in danger of being captured by the invading force.**





# Prussian officer devised blitzkrieg

German General Heinz Guderian developed the blitzkrieg tactic to avoid a repeat of the carnage of World War I's locked fronts.

**T**he Prussian officer and aristocrat Heinz Guderian had personal experience of Germany's defeat in World War I. As an officer on the general staff, he witnessed many futile attempts to penetrate the Allied trenches in northern France.

The experience meant that he was one of the few to understand how fast vehicles and planes could radically change the way wars could be fought. He realised that tanks needed to gather in large groups that could

break through the enemy's hitherto impenetrable lines of defence and secure lightning-fast military victories. Guderian described his theories in the book *Achtung – Panzer!* Hitler studied the work intensively and was so enthusiastic about Guderian's ideas that he appointed him as a general shortly after taking power in 1933.

Guderian's theories proved frighteningly effective in Poland and France, with both countries being defeated in under seven weeks.



BPK

*Guderian revolutionised modern warfare with his new mobile warfare tactics.*

*A German Panzer IV tank rumbles across the steppes in the Caucasus on the Eastern Front in September 1942.*

BPK







*A German reconnaissance unit from the 8th SS Cavalry Division during the offensive against the Soviet Union in 1941. The scouts tracked down enemy supply troops and quickly defeated them.*

BPK

## Panzers annihilated their enemies

**Hitler assembled his most modern weapons into large armoured divisions. The powerful units were the backbone of the German Army.**

**T**o ensure the blitzkrieg succeeded, Hitler developed one of the most effective war machines of World War II: the panzer division.

Previously, German infantry, artillery and tanks had been assigned to all regiments. Now, the armoured units were gathered together to create an all-mighty destructive force.

The mobility of the panzer divisions and the Germans' ability to exploit them was the main reason for Germany's victories in the first years

of the war. Panzer divisions usually consisted of 16,000 men and 3,000 vehicles – including around 200 tanks, which, when gathered together in large groups, could easily defeat enemies' scattered clusters of tanks.

In addition to their tanks, the panzer divisions were also equipped with self-propelled artillery and mobile infantry that protected the tanks' flanks.

Finally, the newly organised divisions also included mobile supply troops with fuel and ammunition.





# Attack deeply

- Tanks continue into enemy territory, severing all communication
- The mobile infantry spreads out and begins to surround the enemy

**A**fter the breakthrough at Sedan, Guderian's three German armoured divisions quickly rolled deep behind the French front line.

French reserves marching towards the front were easy pickings for the German tanks and reconnaissance units. And in the air, the Stukas chased French tanks, mercilessly bombing them one by one. Twenty kilometres behind the front line, Guderian ordered his tanks west – behind the heavily fortified Maginot Line, which ran the length of the French-German border.

The German manoeuvre surrounded the French soldiers in what were supposed to be

their 'impregnable' fortresses. Now, they were isolated without any possibility of help.

At the same time, the rest of the German panzer divisions stormed on towards the English Channel, reaching it in ten days. As a result, 400,000 Allied soldiers in north-west France and Belgium were cut off from their main force and unable to obtain supplies and ammunition. Trapped in a 'pocket' at the French port of Dunkirk, they were forced into a desperate escape to England in a thrown-together flotilla that included everything from warships to fishing boats.



## MOBILE INFANTRY

The new panzer divisions included infantry with their own vehicles, which allowed them to quickly move around the battlefield.

**Role:** Secured tanks against counter-attacks.

**Weaponry:** Machine guns, mortars and anti-tank guns.

**Speed:** Transported troops at up to 100 km/h.

**Variants:** Some vehicles had anti-aircraft or heavy guns.

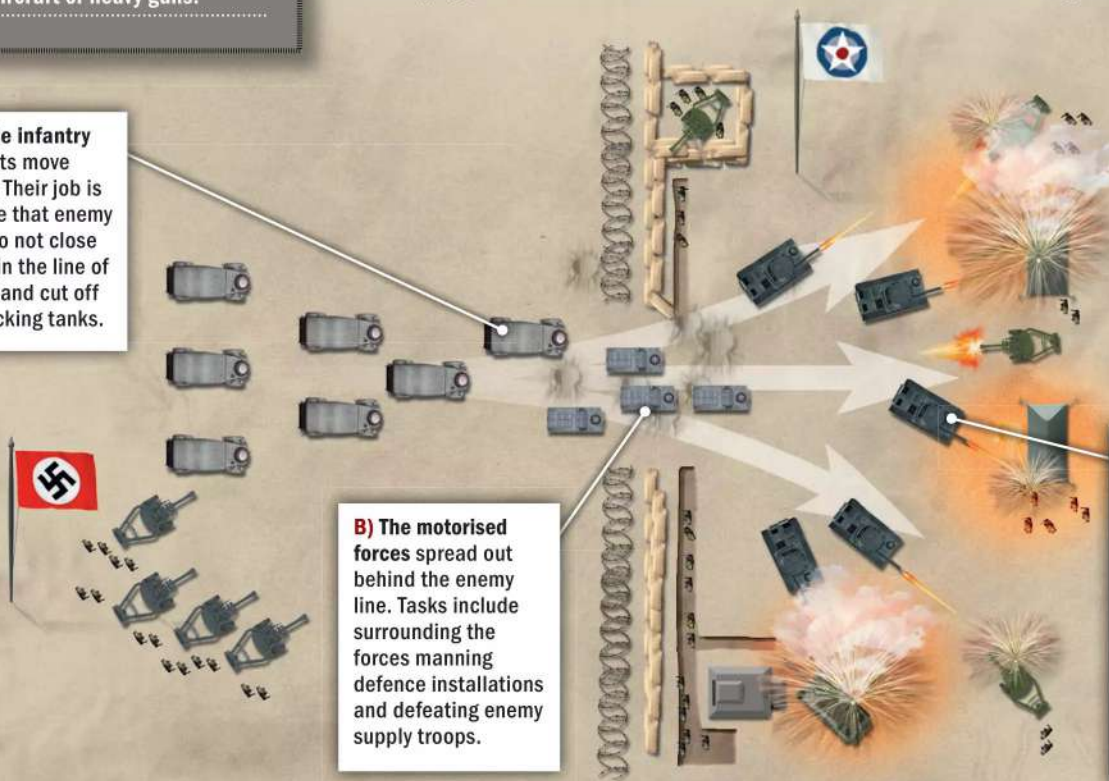


Tanks from the 3rd Panzer Division near the Terek River in the southern Soviet Union. Early in the campaign, the Germans surrounded hundreds of thousands of Soviets using deep attacks.

**A) Mobile infantry** transports move forward. Their job is to ensure that enemy troops do not close the gap in the line of defence and cut off the attacking tanks.

**B) The motorised forces** spread out behind the enemy line. Tasks include surrounding the forces manning defence installations and defeating enemy supply troops.

**C) Tanks** avoid strong enemy forces. Instead, they attack the enemy's field headquarters, disabling their communication and creating confusion and chaos among the enemy.





# Defeat the enemy



- Enemy forces are isolated in pockets without supplies or contact with the outside
- Pockets are defeated using specially trained infantry, dive-bombers and guns

**B**y the end of May 1940, the encircled French soldiers at Sedan and along the Maginot Line were fighting for their lives. German units moved from bunker to bunker with flamethrowers and grenades. Faced with the prospect of dying in a hopeless battle, the French soldiers surrendered in their thousands. Soon, the road to Paris was open, and a few weeks later, on 25th June, France surrendered.

In just six weeks, the German panzer divisions defeated one of Europe's great powers and assuaged many Germans of the bitterness they had felt following their defeat in World

War I. The campaign became not only the Germany's first blitzkrieg but also its greatest. The next year – during the invasion of the Soviet Union – the lightning war began to slow as the Soviets fought furiously for every pocket.

The fierce battles delayed the infantry's advance and isolated the German armoured divisions several hundred kilometres ahead of the rest of the army. The lack of petrol, ammunition and auxiliary troops ultimately halted the German advance just 20 kilometres shy of Moscow in December 1941. Guderian's blitzkrieg had finally stalled.

## INFANTRY

During World War II, the bulk of the German Army still consisted of infantry marching and fighting on foot.

**Role:** Defeat forces in the surrounded pockets.

**Weaponry:** Rifles, mortars, grenades and machine guns.

**Speed:** The infantry usually fought and marched on foot.

**Special units:** Some units were armed with flamethrowers.

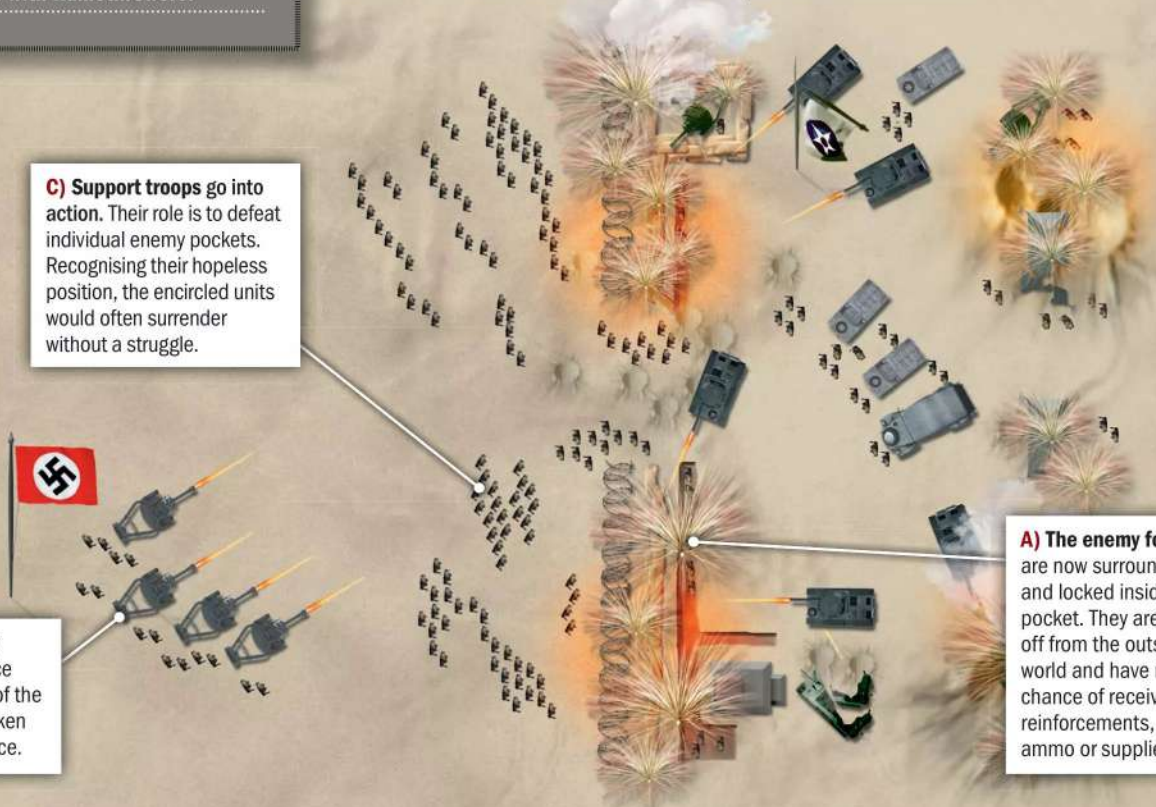


German soldiers battle to take one of the fortifications on the Maginot Line in June 1940. Flamethrowers were often used to clear the path into the defences.

**C) Support troops go into action.** Their role is to defeat individual enemy pockets. Recognising their hopeless position, the encircled units would often surrender without a struggle.

**B) The artillery** launches a fierce bombardment of the pockets to weaken enemy resistance.

**A) The enemy forces** are now surrounded and locked inside a pocket. They are cut off from the outside world and have no chance of receiving reinforcements, ammo or supplies.







*German troops attack a French position in June 1940. The soldiers are aided by a sustained artillery bombardment.*

BPK

## Allies copied blitzkrieg tactics

Germany's early victories prompted the Allies to adopt blitzkrieg methods themselves and defeat the Nazis at their own game.

**F**rance's defeat in under six weeks in June 1940 led the US, Soviet and British military to change the structure of their armies. The Allies began concentrating their tanks in large units, rather than spreading them throughout their forces.

From spring 1942, they fought the formerly invincible German Army using Guderian's four-phase blitzkrieg approach, including at the Battle of Stalingrad, where in November 1942, the Soviets succeeded in surrounding

the German 6th Army, capturing 300,000 soldiers.

Even today, Guderian's theories of lightning warfare still apply. The two Gulf Wars that were waged against Iraq in 1990-1991 and 2003 are textbook examples of the superiority of blitzkrieg tactics. The coalition first softened up the enemy with a lengthy bombardment of strategic targets, followed by a rapid armoured assault, which quickly defeated Saddam Hussein's weakened forces.

### FURTHER READING

- Len Deighton: *Blitzkrieg*, Pimlico, 2007
- Robert M Citino: *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, Stackpole Books, 2008
- Paolo Battistelli: *Panzer Divisions: The Blitzkrieg Years*, Osprey, 2007



# BATTLE

Two of the world's best fighter planes – the German Messerschmitt Bf 109 and the British Spitfire – competed for control of the skies over Britain.

## Britain



One-seater fighters ..... c. 600

Two-seater fighters ..... c. 150

Bombers ..... c. 550

## BRITAIN/1940



In early June 1940, Hitler's armies capture France at lightning speed. The Germans only need to defeat Britain before they can move against the Soviet Union. But the British refuse to give in.

## CHANNEL BATTLE 10TH JULY-11TH AUG

German planes attacked British convoys in the English Channel. The Nazis wanted to test Britain's strength.

## RADAR WAR 12TH-23RD AUG

The British found themselves in trouble when German bombers attacked their all-important radar installations.



# OF BRITAIN

**For 117 days**  
*the British population*  
*fought for their lives*



## Germany

One-seater fighters ..... c. 1,100

Two-seater fighters ..... c. 350

Bombers ..... c. 1,400

## RAF CLOSE TO COLLAPSE 24TH AUG-6TH SEPT

Bomb after bomb fell on British airbases after the Germans decided to crush the RAF.

## LONDON LAID WASTE 7TH SEPT-3RD NOV

Hitler changed tactics and ordered an attack on London. For 57 days in a row, the British capital was bombed.



# Fighters were almost evenly matched

**The German Messerschmitt fighter was both faster and better armed than the British Spitfire. The Messerschmitt's advantage, however, was offset by the Spitfire's remarkable manoeuvrability.**

The British Spitfire and the German Messerschmitt Bf 109 belonged to a new generation of combat aircraft. They had just one set of wings, and landing gear that could be retracted during flight, and were faster and more heavily armed than previous fighter aircraft.

Germany developed the Messerschmitt Bf 109 immediately after Hitler's takeover in 1933, and the forerunner of the Spitfire took off the following year, as a response to German rearmament. The

two machines were well matched in terms of flight characteristics, although the Bf 109 was slightly faster. When it came to punch, however, the Germans had an advantage: in addition to two machine guns mounted in the cowlings, the Messerschmitt was equipped with two powerful 20-mm guns on its wings. The Spitfire carried only 8-mm machine guns (four on each wing).

However, during battles over the English Channel, the Germans were

amazed at how strong opponents the British fighters were. In previous attacks – on Poland and France, for instance – they'd faced slow, obsolete planes, which were easily defeated. This wasn't the case with the Royal Air Force. When, a few weeks into the air offensive, the Luftwaffe's commander, Hermann Göring, asked one of his aircraft aces what he and his colleagues needed most to win the battle, the pilot promptly replied: "Spitfires!"



German fighter planes were tasked with protecting hundreds of bombers during their missions to Britain, because they didn't have enough firepower to defend themselves.



British Spitfire fighters could easily shoot down the vulnerable German bombers.

BY ELSE CHRISTENSEN  
**A**fter a grey, damp morning, the sun was shining again over Dover's white cliffs on Wednesday, 10th July 1940. Sunbeams sparkled on the water as a convoy of cargo ships passed. Seen from above, the vessels looked like toy ships in an idyllic model landscape. It was a beautiful day in the south of England.

But fighter pilot John Thompson didn't have time to enjoy the view from his cockpit. His eyes were firmly trained on a formation of German bombers that were approaching with deadly intent,

ready to drop their payload on the convoy below. While anti-aircraft guns fired from the beach, Thompson took charge of 12 Hurricane fighter planes, flying directly towards the enemy bombers. The two formations approached each other at a combined speed of 900 kilometres per hour.

The bombers turned and fled. Thompson followed, took aim and fired his aircraft's machine guns. One enemy bomber crashed into the ocean, leaving a trail of smoke. From the beach, locals

watched as the combatants swarmed around one another. The aerial fight was the first significant incident in what would become known as the Battle of Britain. The conflict was history's first major air battle, and for more than 100 days, the onslaught would not only allow Britain to maintain air superiority over her own islands, but would also mark a turning point in WWII.

## Britain was last bastion

The first six months of 1940 had seen a heady series of triumphs for Adolf Hitler



# CHANNEL BATTLE: 10TH JULY-11TH AUG



## Hurricane was British workhorse

The RAF also had the Hurricane fighter, which was not as fast as the Spitfire, but it was easy to manufacture in large numbers. The hull consisted of a metal skeleton covered with canvas. This meant that aircraft factories could build 2.5 Hurricanes in the time it took to produce a single Spitfire.

WWW.RICHARD-SEAMAN.COM

## Spitfire was an aerial acrobat

Rapid twists and turns in the air were the Spitfire's strength. Its wings were elliptical, resulting in great aerodynamics and manoeuvrability. If forced, the Spitfire could shake off a pursuer by rolling half a turn, then pulling out quickly from the subsequent dive. Its main weakness was that it was equipped with a standard

carburettor, in contrast to the Messerschmitt. During steep dives, fuel was forced out of the carburettor and the engine cut out.

Four Browning machine guns with 300 shots each



Cockpit protected with steel plates at the bottom and rear

Total wingspan of approx. 11 m



Rolls-Royce Merlin engine with 1,030 horsepower

OSPREY PUBLISHING

## Messerschmitt could fly highest

For the German fighters, range was the greatest challenge during the Battle of Britain. With a full tank, a Messerschmitt Bf 109 could fly a maximum of 660 kilometres, giving it only ten minutes of flight time over London before it had to turn back. However, the Messerschmitt could fly higher than the British planes

While the Spitfire engine, with its standard carburettor, began to splutter and cut out during dives, the direct fuel injection of the Bf 109

aircraft's Daimler-Benz engine ensured a steady supply of fuel even during extreme manoeuvres.

Oerlikon MG FF machine gun



Two MG 17 machine guns with 1,000 rounds each

Total wingspan of approx. 10 m



Daimler-Benz engine with 1,175 horsepower

OSPREY PUBLISHING

and the Third Reich. In April, German troops had effortlessly taken Denmark and Norway, and in May, Holland, Belgium and France fell, too. The United States had remained neutral and the Soviet Union was willingly cooperating with the Germans. Only Britain stood in the way of a Europe united under the shadow of the swastika. The question was: how long could she hold out?

British troops had been stationed in France since the war broke out in September 1939, but in the summer of 1940, Hitler's seemingly unstoppable

army had pushed them back to the Dunkirk beaches and into an ignominious makeshift evacuation to Britain. Tonnes of weapons, trucks, ammunition and fuel were left on the beaches. It was a military disaster for Britain, which was left on the brink of collapse.

"The final victory over England is now only a question of time," concluded Germany's Chief of Staff Alfred Jodl.

### Freight ships targeted

Operation Sea Lion, as the German invasion plan was code-named, was due

to deliver the killer blow. It was based on the blitzkrieg principle – rapid infantry and tank advances, supported by air strikes – that had brought the Germans success throughout Europe.

But Hitler had no illusions about the task ahead. Since the Battle of Hastings in 1066, no one had managed to cross the Channel and invade Britain. His only option was to eliminate the Royal Air Force (RAF), or his fleet and army would be unable to land on British soil.

The Nazis transferred bombers and fighters to newly built bases in



## Fighters took to the air in ten minutes

**Germany's Operation Adlerangriff (Eagle Attack) was intended to be the beginning of the end for the RAF, but the British were prepared. A highly efficient reporting system ensured the planes were ready for battle in a few minutes.**

The Germans tried again and again, but it was impossible to outwit the RAF. With just a few exceptions, the Luftwaffe's aircraft were always greeted by battle-ready British fighter planes as they approached Britain's coast.

The secret was the British reporting system developed by the RAF's energetic commander-in-chief, Hugh Dowding. As soon as the operators of the British radar stations intercepted enemy aircraft on their screens, they relayed details of the estimated number of aircraft and their

bearing to the 'Filter Room' at Fighter Command HQ. Here, the positions of the enemy planes were marked with wooden pieces on a map table. Then the enemy's movement was continuously updated.

On several occasions, the Germans sent a small group of planes ahead of the main attack to entice British fighters to take to the air prematurely. Once the British fighters had used up their fuel pursuing the decoys, the Germans launched the real attack. This made it imperative that radar stations and ground

observation staff could verify that any attack was genuine. Once verified, the 'filtered' information was passed to the operating room, which alerted local aircraft units.

Over the phone, the pilots then received the order to "Scramble" when it was time to take off. From the first blip on a radar screen to the phone ringing at the airbase that would send up the planes, it typically took six minutes.

A maximum of four minutes later, the aircraft were in the air.



*In the Filter Room at the headquarters of British Fighter Command, details of enemy aircraft received from radar stations and ground observers were plotted on a big map.*



*Once German planes reached Britain, surveillance passed to people on the ground.*

northern France and began bombing ships in the English Channel. The Germans termed these attacks *Kanalkampf* (Channel battle), their purpose being to cut Britain's supply lines while destroying as many British aircraft as possible.

### **Churchill: "We will never surrender"**

Although Hitler and his staff planned Operation Sea Lion down to the smallest detail, they didn't believe a military invasion would be necessary. Hitler assumed that Britain would recognise

"her militarily hopeless situation" and that a small push would be enough to make the British surrender and sign a peace accord on German terms.

However, much had changed since October 1938, when Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had signed the Munich Agreement with the German dictator in the hope of there being "peace for our time". Winston Churchill had been appointed prime minister on the same day the German tanks had rolled into France and he was not a man to be easily intimidated. After the last British

troops were evacuated from Dunkirk, he declared, "We shall go on to the end. ... [W]e shall never surrender."

### **British surprised the Germans**

The Luftwaffe was therefore surprised at the dogged resistance it met over the English Channel. The RAF had just over 600 modern fighter planes, half the German number. But despite Britain's numerical inferiority in both pilots and machines, they shot down ten German aircraft on the first day for the loss of just two planes. Technically, the British



## British radar could detect aircraft in France

Both Britain and Germany used basic radar. But unlike the German system, British radar was connected to the Chain Home system. From the east coast of Scotland to the west coast of Wales lay 29 radar stations with tall transmitters that bombarded the space in front of them with radio waves. The system had a range of over 80 km, so the British were warned whenever a large group of German planes took off from airbases

in northern France. Using radar, the British could determine the distance, altitude and course of enemy aircraft. To prevent German planes from flying under the radar, the British also had low-level systems that could detect planes at lower altitudes, but they had a more limited range. Once the planes reached Britain, observers followed them using binoculars. In cloudy weather, they used aircraft engine noise to judge course and altitude.



British radar transmitters were very effective, but they could only scan forwards.

## Radar transmitters were impossible to destroy

Germany soon realised that the British radar system was the reason why RAF fighters were always ready when German planes approached over the Channel, so it decided to put the system out of action. On 12th August, a large force of German bombers attacked the 100-metre-tall radar masts, which were easy to spot from the air. But the transmitters proved to be almost impossible to destroy. Only a direct hit could destroy the masts and they were very difficult to target. Even the pressure wave from the bombs went straight through the latticework.

When the Germans did manage to hit either the transmitters or the associated radar stations, the British were able to get the network running again in just a few hours. Once the Nazis discovered that the system could be repaired in such a short period, they gave up attacking radar and concentrated instead on British airbases.

fighter planes were more on a par with their German counterparts, and the RAF was a tougher opponent than the poorly equipped air forces that the German pilots had hitherto been up against. The British also had the advantage that German fighters had to use up precious fuel to cross the Channel and fight over enemy territory.

In the bitter fighting that followed, one of the British squadrons developed a bold tactic. Instead of flying over the German bombers and turning to attack them from behind, they flew directly

towards the German aircraft while firing their machine guns. This approach made it easier for the British to target their enemies, and forced the terrified German pilots to manoeuvre quickly to avoid a collision. This made them even easier to hit. But it was a dangerous tactic and RAF fighters did sometimes collide with their German foes.

For almost a month, German air attacks continued on British ships and ports. And although British fighter planes tried to protect the convoys, many cargo ships carrying vital supplies

were sunk. Losses in the air were high on both sides, but the RAF accounted for most 'kills'; between 10th and 23rd July, the British lost 45 aircraft to the Luftwaffe's 82.

It didn't take the Germans long to realise that they needed to change their strategy to counter the skill and determination of the RAF pilots. Consequently, they began to focus on destroying British airbases, aircraft and radar equipment. Head of the Luftwaffe, Hermann Göring, threw himself into the task with zeal: "The Führer has



## Luftwaffe killed RAF's best pilots

**At the start of the Battle of Britain, the RAF trained only 65 pilots a week but lost an average of 120 in the same period. In the end, the lack of pilots was so acute that recruits only received four weeks' training.**

As the summer wore on, the British began to suffer greatly from the Luftwaffe's constant bombardment. Airbases were in ruins, and industrial cities bombed. The RAF lost many aircraft, but more of a problem was the lack of pilots. As one put it, "The loss of one experienced guy is worse than six Spitfires."

Records of the pilots' victories showed that no fewer than 80 percent of enemy aircraft were shot down by just ten

percent of the pilots – the most experienced ones. Initially, the British were training about 300 pilots a month, while the Luftwaffe trained 800. In order to keep up with demand, the training programme was shortened from several months to only four weeks, and many new pilots were sent up with no experience of operating the aircraft's machine guns, while only a few ever learnt to fly in formation. This meant new pilots often got split up from the rest and became easy targets for the German fighters.

The RAF's senior commanders knew that Britain would lose the battle if the Germans continued their current strategy.

### Civil war provided combat experience

Immediately before the war, many German pilots had served in the Condor Legion, a unit that fought for the fascists in the Spanish Civil War. Here they received training in combat and developed a loose flight formation that was better suited for combat against other fighters than the traditional V-formation used by the British.



*In late August and early September, the RAF lost nearly 280 fighter planes in just under 14 days.*

ordered me to crush Britain with my Luftwaffe," he declared proudly.

### Germans attacked radar stations

Operation *Adlerangriff* (Eagle Attack) became the code name of a series of German raids designed to break the RAF. The first was on 12th August, when German bombers attacked radar stations on the south coast of England. Britain's radar system was one of the RAF's best assets. The attack knocked out several installations, and a few hours later, the Nazis took advantage and sent

around 220 bombers and fighters to southern England to bomb RAF airbases.

After a few hours, the radar system was operational again. The following day, a fresh wave of bombers swept over the bases and more devastation followed. Both hangars and the planes inside were destroyed, workshops were flattened and the telephone system was put out of action. Runways were bombed, grounding the pilots. Göring was convinced that the British only had about 450 fighters left and that the Battle of Britain would be over in a

couple of weeks. In fact, British aircraft factories had made sure that the RAF now had over 700 operational fighters.

### Main British bases attacked

After a few days, the Germans began to concentrate their attacks on the main RAF airbases, including Tangmere on the south coast and Kenley and Biggin Hill just south-east of London. During the last two weeks of August, Biggin Hill was bombed almost daily. For several weeks, exhausted British pilots at the base were sent up time and again to



# RAF CLOSE TO COLLAPSE: 24TH AUG–6TH SEPT



ASSAULT ON THE CAPITAL BY ROBERT TAYLOR © MILITARY GALLERY WINDOVER UK

*German bombers attacked British airbases to bring the RAF to its knees, but the raids also put demands on German fighters, which had to escort the vulnerable bombers.*

## Britain invested all in plane production

To remedy the RAF's shortage of aircraft, Churchill set up the Ministry of Aircraft Production in May 1940. The ministry ensured that the British economy was on a war footing and manufacturers of aircraft and related products were given priority access to raw materials. Private industry, not least the automotive sector, also contributed by supplying equipment and helping to operate the state-owned aircraft factories.

Aircraft production grew at a record pace, while the Germans, who didn't prioritise the aviation industry, soon began to lag behind. From June to September 1940,



GETTY IMAGES

*The British managed to rapidly increase fighter plane production.*

Germany built 775 new Messerschmitts, while Britain produced no fewer than 1,900 new fighters. It was Britain's ramped-up production of fighter jets that would eventually see off Göring's Luftwaffe.

defend against the German fighters. After days without sleep, they were exhausted, and fatigue began to sap their concentration and fighting ability.

The same was true at many of the other bases. On 15th August, the Luftwaffe made 2,200 flights over British airbases. In order to spare personnel at the hardest-hit airfields, the RAF began to rotate pilots between bases. Along with his colleagues from 616 Squadron, Spitfire pilot Hugh Dundas was sent to Kenley to relieve the pilots there. After lunch, they left in

high spirits, "eager to take off for Kenley and glory". They were met with a shocking sight: much of the base lay in ruins, and the area was littered with wreckage and bomb craters

For the pilots, it was a much-needed pat on the back when Prime Minister Churchill stated in late August that "never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few". At the same time, however, it was clear that the RAF was on the brink of collapse. The bases were in a deplorable condition, and combat fatigue had

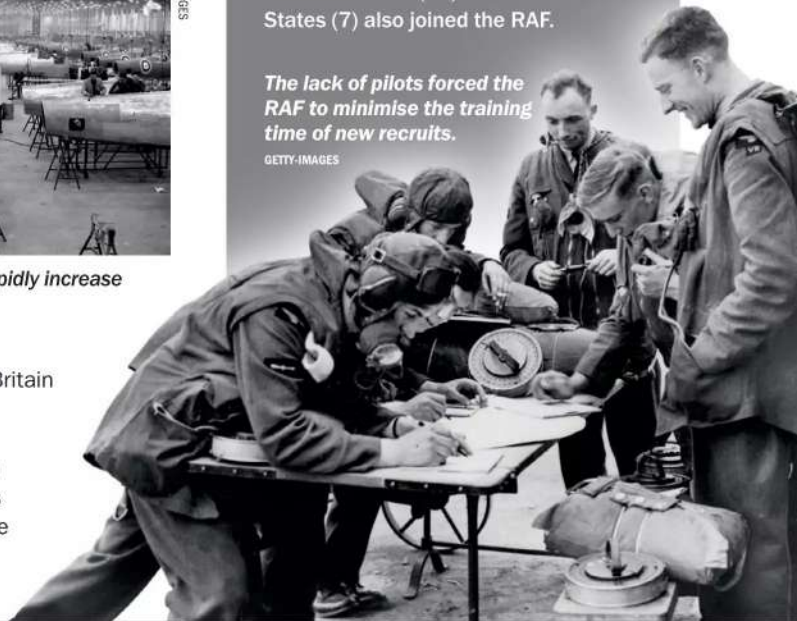
## Foreign pilots helped the British

Of the nearly 3,000 pilots who fought for the British, 574 were foreigners. Some had fled countries that had been occupied by the Germans. These men were highly motivated and often had lots of experience. Language tended to be a barrier, however, and the foreign pilots had rarely flown modern aircraft such as the Spitfire before.

Despite these difficulties, foreign pilots served with distinction – in particular, the two Polish squadrons (302 and 303) were known for their combat ability. The Poles were the largest single group of foreigners, with about 145 men, but pilots from New Zealand (127), Canada (112), Czechoslovakia (89) and the United States (7) also joined the RAF.

*The lack of pilots forced the RAF to minimise the training time of new recruits.*

GETTY IMAGES



begun to set in. On 24th August, the south-east coast base of Manston was virtually levelled by 20 Ju-88 bombers. After that, the base was closed and only served as an emergency landing ground. At the start of September, six out of seven bases belonging to Group 11 – the fighters aircraft defending London – were almost wiped out.

British planes were also being shot down at an alarming rate. Within two weeks – from 26th August to 6th September – the RAF lost 273 aircraft, and despite factories operating at



**German bombers dropped over one million firebombs over London during the Blitz, leaving the city burning day and night.**

POLFOTO/TOFFOTO

## Bombs rained down for 57 days in a row

**The Blitz cost more than 20,000 lives in London. Fearing that morale would plummet, the British government did everything in its power to encourage the population to carry on as normal.**

The Luftwaffe bombed London daily for almost two months. The Blitz – as the attacks became known – hit hardest in the poor residential areas of London's East End. Residents were forced into crowded, dirty shelters, without toilets or sanitation. The government refused to build large, comfortable shelters because it dreaded the idea that people would want to stay in them. If daily life ground to a halt, morale would fall, the argument

went. For the same reason, the government asked the press to write about parties in London, and Churchill raged when he heard that well-off families had sent their children out of the city.

The hard-pressed residents of the East End continued their daily routine as well as they could – largely because they had no choice. Over time, their disrupted days found new rhythms. While queuing for rations, housewives swapped tips on how

to make meat and vegetables last all week, along with news about who'd been bombed out of their homes. Folk came together in cellars and on underground platforms during raids, waiting for the all-clear signal telling them that the streets were safe again – for now.

The attacks on London subsided after October, but didn't stop entirely until May 1941. By then, the Blitz had killed more than 20,000 people in London alone.

maximum capacity, production could not keep up.

More disastrous was the loss of pilots; every week, the RAF lost around 120. After only ten days at Kenley, Hugh Dundas had lost most of his colleagues from the 616th Squadron – of the original 12, five were killed or declared missing in action, and five were injured.

### **Hitler ordered London bombings**

Although the Germans, like the British, lost many planes and pilots, they could rejoice that the Luftwaffe was slowly but

surely winning the battle. The RAF was "finished as a fighting force", Albert Kesselring, field marshal general of the Luftwaffe, proudly told Göring.

Hitler, however, was becoming impatient. In retaliation for German bombers accidentally hitting London, the British bombed Berlin. The reprisals infuriated Hitler, because the Nazis had promised the German people that Berlin would never be attacked. He also believed that a change in strategy might force the stubborn British to surrender, which would allow him to focus on the

Soviet Union. Rotterdam and Warsaw had shown what carpet-bombing could do to a city – now it was London's turn. Nearly a thousand German aircraft participated in the first attack, which came late in the afternoon on 7th September. The bombs hit the docks, where a gasworks exploded in a huge fireball. The docklands were in flames. An ammunition depot and a residential area were also hit; 306 were killed.

"Explosions were everywhere, there just was not a break, bang after bang after bang," George Turnbull, a home





Britain set up powerful anti-aircraft guns in London's Hyde Park, among other places.

## Anti-aircraft guns maintained citizens' morale

To protect vulnerable targets, the British set up scores of barrage balloons. The big silver-coloured inflatables, tethered by multiple steel cables, prevented bombers from flying at low altitude, making it difficult for the Germans to hit their targets.

Anti-aircraft guns were also set up in selected spots, including on rooftops

and in city parks, where they had unobstructed views. Searchlights helped the operators hit enemy aircraft during night raids. The effectiveness of anti-aircraft fire was limited, however, especially at the start of the Blitz. But the sound of the anti-aircraft guns helped create a sense of security and kept up morale among the citizens.

## London's volunteer fire service fought losing battle

"Send all the bloody pumps you've got – the whole bloody world's on fire," that was the message when the first German bombs hit London's docks on the afternoon of 7th September. At the beginning of the Blitz, in autumn 1940, the capital badly needed all the firefighters and firefighting equipment the city could muster. Thanks to the citizens' willingness to sacrifice and a new emergency law, London's volunteer fire service had 25,000 recruits, many of them women. However, the relentless German bombing which included incendiary shells, made it impossible for the fire brigade to keep up.

The London Fire Service had to work around the clock to put out the many fires in the city.



Despite the daily bombings, Londoners continued their daily lives as best they could.

guard, recalled. "The clang of bells from fire service vehicles and ambulances were drowned out by these bombs... God, this seemed to go on for hours."

### Britain stood firm

For 57 nights in a row, bombs fell on London. The sky was filled with the shrill howls of sirens, the drone of planes and the eerie hiss of falling bombs. After a couple of nights of attacks, US journalist Edward R Murrow wrote: "This night bombing is serious and sensational. It makes headlines,

kills people, and smashes property; but it doesn't win wars."

Murrow had read the situation correctly. The shift from bombarding airbases to civilian areas gave the RAF breathing room. Airbases were repaired, pilot numbers grew, and the industry was once again able to meet the force's demand for new aircraft. On 15th September, when the Luftwaffe arrived over London for what would prove to be the decisive battle of the air campaign against Britain, the skies were filled with Spitfire and Hurricane fighters. The

day was an unmitigated disaster for the Luftwaffe. A furious Göring blamed the fighter pilots, claiming they'd let down the rest of the German air force.

Two days later, Hitler postponed Operation Sea Lion indefinitely. Three years on, thousands of bombers flew across southern England again, only this time their pilots were British and their targets were German cities.

### FURTHER READING

• David Johnson: *The Battle of Britain, July – October, 1940*, Combined Publishing, 1998 • Stephen Bungay: *The Most Dangerous Enemy: A History of the Battle of Britain*, Aurum Press Ltd, 2001



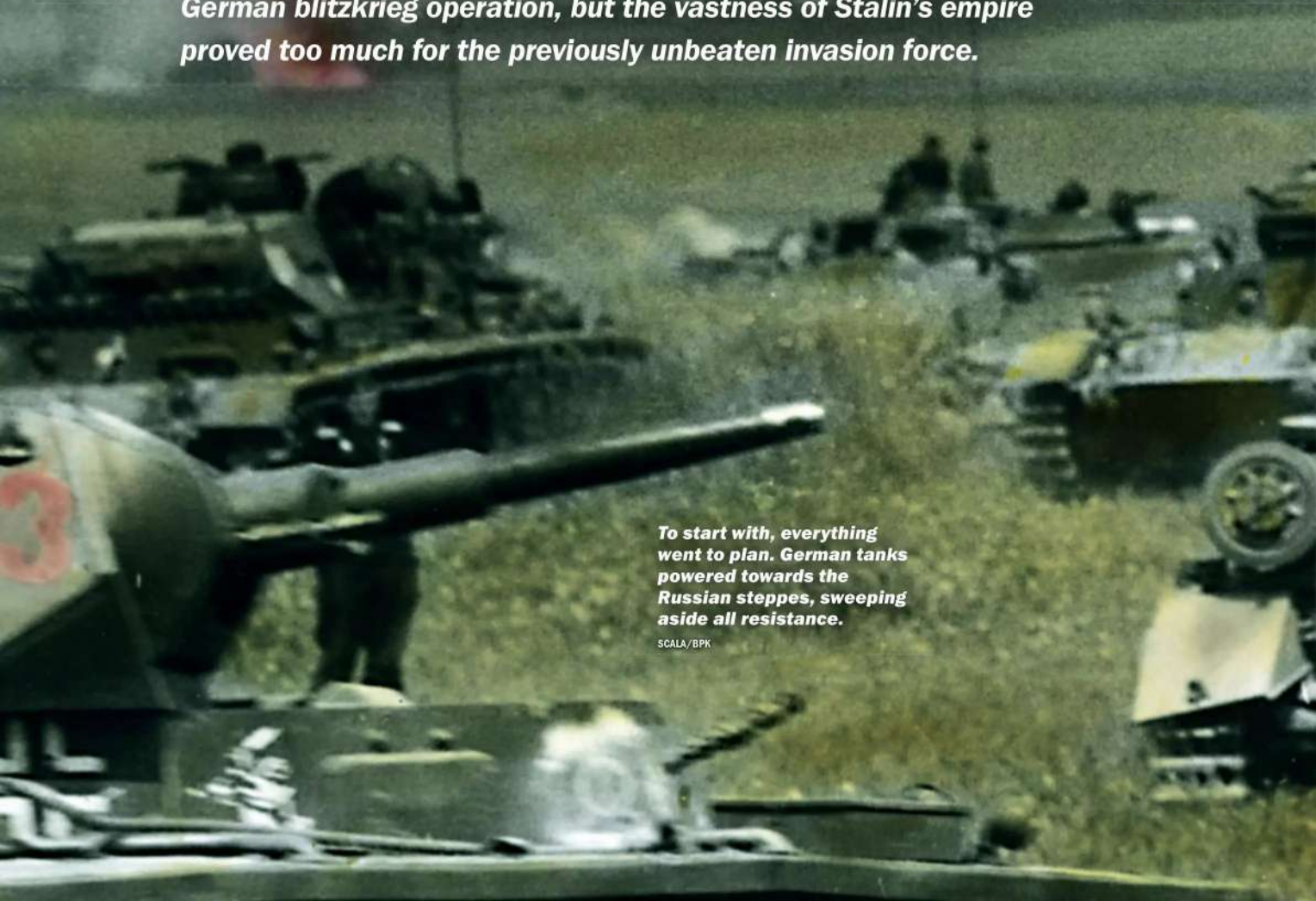
Hitler's panzer divisions roll east:

# History's largest CAMPAIGN

*In June 1941, Hitler launched a surprise attack on the Soviet Union. Around 3.7 million soldiers stormed across the border in a gigantic German blitzkrieg operation, but the vastness of Stalin's empire proved too much for the previously unbeaten invasion force.*

*To start with, everything went to plan. German tanks powered towards the Russian steppes, sweeping aside all resistance.*

SCALA/BPK







### GERMANY/1941

World War II has been raging for two years. Europe is occupied by German troops from Norway to the Balkans, and Hitler now turns his attention eastwards. The Nazis are ready for a long-awaited showdown against the Soviet Union.





BY THOMAS HEBGAARD

The sky above Lieutenant Siegfried Knappe's observation post was already growing lighter as daybreak approached. It was 03.14 on 22nd June – the longest day of the year was about to begin. The smell of pine needles hung in the air at

the German-Soviet border in the middle of what had – until 1939 – been Poland.

The calm wouldn't last. The German officer had spent most of the night inspecting his troops, who now stood ready with their loaded guns. But they were by no means the only ones awake at that hour. Along a 1,800-kilometre

line that stretched from the Baltic in the north to Romania in the south, millions of German soldiers were prepared for battle. The men checked their watches, inspected their weapons one last time, and thought of their families as their sharpened senses picked out the first birdsong of the day.

A moment later, the silence was shattered. As the Luftwaffe headed for targets behind the Red Army's lines, the artillery received orders to open fire. Along the entire front, thousands of German guns launched a bombardment. Black and yellow smoke filled the air, and the stench of gunpowder reached Knappe's nostrils. For fifteen merciless minutes, the thunder of guns firing filled the air. Then Knappe heard the 'pop' of a flare, and the morning sky turned red.

Knappe's artillery ceased firing. Now it was the turn of the infantry to launch its assault on the Soviet outposts. The dreaded German tanks would soon follow – the vanguard of Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. With 3.7 million German, Finnish, Italian, Romanian, Slovak and Hungarian soldiers, the invasion was the largest military operation the world had ever seen. After just a few weeks of fighting, victory would appear inevitable – yet another example of the frightening power of the German blitzkrieg.

As in Poland in 1939 and France in 1940, the German panzer divisions

**The Soviet Union's Gulag camps consumed millions of Stalin's opponents.**

## Stalin crippled the Red Army

**Hitler's troops were met by a Soviet army in chaos. Stalin's paranoia had resulted in a huge purge of the officer corps.**

Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's paranoia cost the Red Army dear. He saw enemies everywhere and carried out The Great Terror (1936-1938) to bring "socially harmful elements" to heel. Millions were sentenced to death or forced labour in Siberia, among them many of the army's most talented commanders.

A total of 9,506 officers were arrested, and most were sentenced

to death, while a further 14,684 were forced to leave the armed forces. The purges targeted senior commanders, leading to a loss of both experience and talent within the Red Army.

These holes were filled with men who blindly obeyed orders or were too incompetent to threaten Stalin. Consequently, the army's leadership proved hopelessly inadequate during Operation Barbarossa in 1941.

POLYTO/ALISTEN BILD & POLYTO/CORBIS



Stalin

**The Red Army's five marshals attend the May Day parade in 1937. A few weeks later, the first fell victim to Stalin's purges.**

POLYTO/CORBIS



Belov

29th June 1938

Tukhachevsky

12th June 1937

Yegorov

22nd February 1939





## 1st offensive: The German tsunami crashes over the border



"Operation Barbarossa" begins. On the first day of the invasion, the Luftwaffe destroys 1,811 – or 25 percent – of Soviet aircraft in Europe.

**Army Group North** marches along the Baltic Sea on course for Leningrad. Two weeks into July, Soviet armoured forces launch a series of fierce attacks. But they are all quickly defeated with heavy losses.

Just one week into the campaign, and **Army Group Centre** has already surrounded the city

of Minsk and captured a large Soviet force inside. Panzer divisions continue at top speed towards Smolensk, where the Red Army's strategic reserves are given a tough ride.

**Army Group South's** advance is slower. Stalin has anticipated a German attack on Ukraine and deployed strong armoured units there. Nevertheless, the Germans halt all counter-attacks and destroy 2,280 Soviet tanks as they advance south of Kiev.

— Soviet Union border — Front on 22nd June — Front on 16th July

hammered deep into enemy territory, while the Luftwaffe removed all obstacles in front of them. City after city fell against the overwhelming force.

### Hitler would eradicate Communism

The Nazi leader had already described his dream of crushing the Soviet Union in his memoir, *Mein Kampf*, which he published over two volumes in 1925-26. Communism must be destroyed, the Slavic people subjugated, and the wide-open plains of the east given over to German colonisation.

The planning of Operation Barbarossa began in secrecy in the summer of 1940. At that point, Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union were bound to each other by treaty. The two regimes were ideological opposites, but in 1939 they'd signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a non-aggression treaty that agreed to divide up central Europe between them.

The deal with Stalin had ensured peace on Germany's eastern border while Hitler invaded Poland and subjugated Western Europe, but by the middle of 1940, it had served its purpose. Hitler decided to break the agreement with the Soviet Union, as he'd done with other treaties. Now, in one stroke, he planned to eliminate Communism and destroy the last remaining power that stood between him and his total domination of Europe. Victory over the Soviet Union would also give him control of Ukraine's huge agricultural output along with access to an endless flow of oil from the Caucasus.

Preparations for Operation Barbarossa took place in an atmosphere of complacency among the German General Staff. That spring, Germany had defeated the French army – considered the best in the world – in just six weeks.

Hitler and his generals were counting on an even easier victory in the Soviet Union, because according to Nazi ideology, they would be facing subhuman Slavs (*untermenschen*).

The Red Army had merely confirmed this prejudice with its incompetent efforts in the Winter War – 500,000 men had invaded Finland in November 1939, but the campaign was a disaster. Stalin's troops suffered one humiliating defeat after another against the stubborn Finns. Only its huge numerical advantage secured the Soviet Union a modest victory four months later.

The Germans' arrogance led to a plan of attack that placed huge demands on the Wehrmacht's war machine. Generals ignored the fact that factories couldn't possibly deliver tanks in the quantities required and that supplies wouldn't be able to keep up if its famous panzer divisions advanced as fast and as far as the operational plans dictated.

Problems in the Balkans delayed the attack on the Soviets. Hitler's Italian

allies had invaded Greece, but the campaign was a shambles. Mussolini's forces were sent packing as the Greeks received British reinforcements. Operation Barbarossa had to be postponed from 15th May 1941 to 22nd June to give the Wehrmacht time to clean up the chaos in the Balkans.

Eight days before Barbarossa was launched, Hitler held court with the military's top brass at the Reich Chancellery in Berlin. He listened to his generals' plans before giving his own assessment: the Red Army would put up a strong defence, but the campaign would be over in six weeks.

### The Germans snuck up to the border

While dignitaries in Berlin toasted their plans with champagne, life as he knew it was about to end for Hans Roth.

The 28-year-old soldier had to leave his comfortable garrison life in the south-eastern Polish city of Zamosc, with its beautiful marketplace and opulent baroque mansions. His unit ►



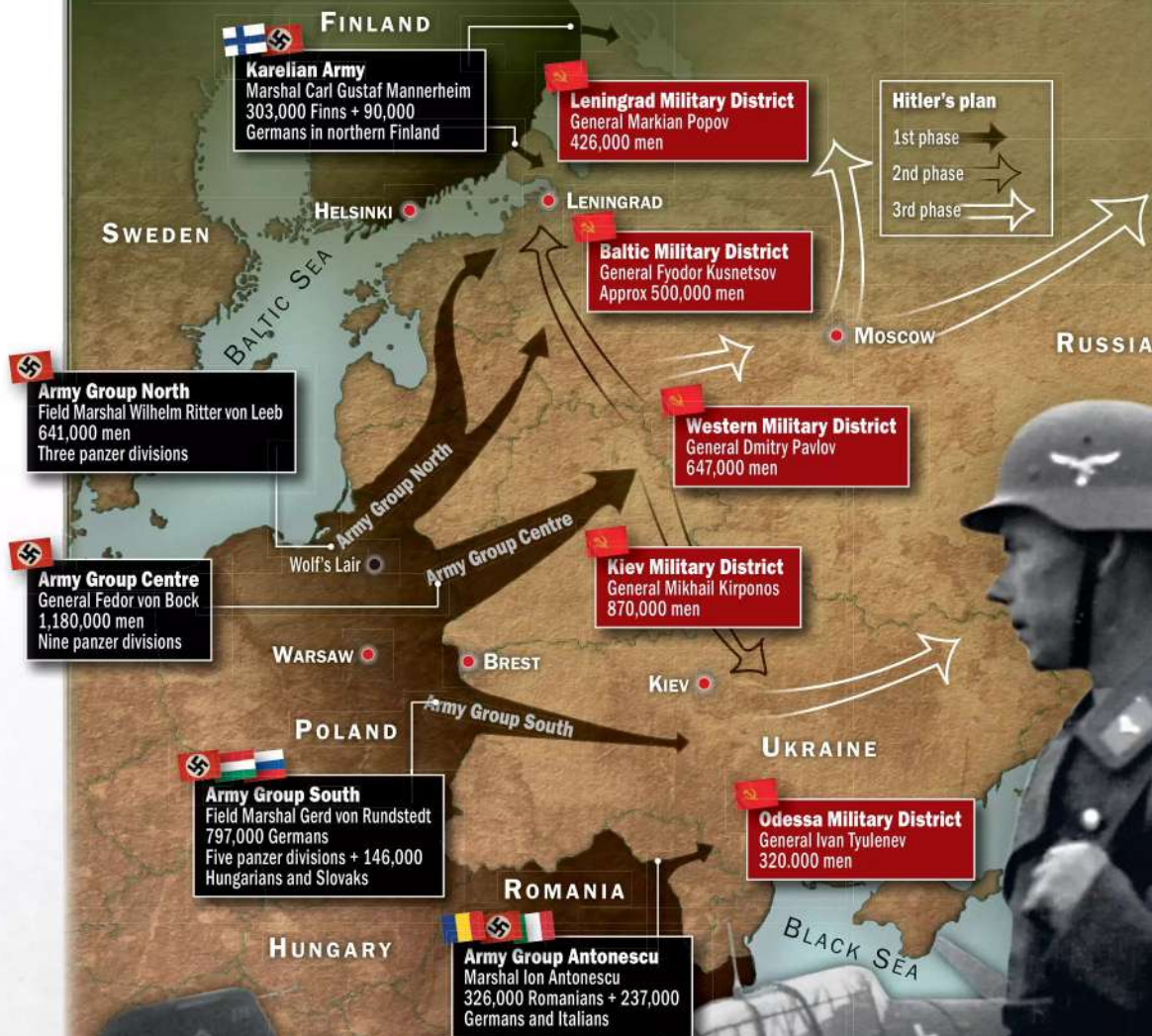
On the morning of 22nd June, German advance forces began repairing the broken bridges across the River Bug on the Soviet-Polish border, so tanks could roll across unimpeded.

PHOTO/ILLUSTRATION



## The Wehrmacht versus the Red Army

Stalin's armies had more tanks and planes than the Germans, plus huge numbers of guns. But the Wehrmacht was battle-hardened, far better organised, and was led by excellent generals. The plan's first two phases involved an advance deep into Soviet territory, after which Red Army forces were to be surrounded and destroyed. Once cleared, German troops would continue through Moscow to the Ural Mountains and to the Caucasus in the south.



	AXIS FORCES	THE RED ARMY
<b>Soldiers</b>	3,700,000	2,700,000
<b>Tanks</b>	3,505	14,000
<b>Aircraft</b>	2,995	7,133
<b>Guns</b>	7,146	34,700

The Luftwaffe dominated the skies over the Eastern Front. Many Soviet planes were destroyed on the ground, and the rest were obsolete.

POLFO/COBIS



17th July – 25th August



## 2nd Offensive: The Wehrmacht opens the road to Moscow



**Army Group North** takes a week off to reorganise before resuming its offensive towards Leningrad. At the same time, Finnish forces advance on the city from the north. Soviet troops prepare for a siege.

At Smolensk, **Army Group Centre** surrounds a large part of Stalin's strategic reserve in Europe. Counter-attacks save part of the force, but over 300,000 men surrender on 5th August. The Red Army has run out of

armoured forces in front of Moscow, but instead of taking the capital, Hitler diverts the group's panzer divisions north and south to help the other two army groups.

**Army Group South** bypasses Kiev to storm through the endless Ukrainian fields to the south. Several Soviet armies are forced together and surrounded in a 'pocket' at Uman. 100,000 soldiers perish, and as many more surrender on 5th August.

had been ordered to move down to the River Bug, to spy on the Soviet border defences ahead of the invasion.

On the far bank of the slow-moving waterway, he could see the Soviet Union's red flag, its hammer and sickle flying above the forest trees. Bunkers and machine-gun nests were less than a hundred metres away. If an overzealous Soviet guard spotted the patrol, he'd be able to shoot down Roth and his comrades in an instant: "Are we the scapegoats who are supposed to be slaughtered by the Russians [as a pretext] for the German attack?" he noted with suspicion in his diary.

Roth's patrol crept along the riverbank to map out the Soviet positions, using the vegetation as cover. From the other side of the water, the sound of armoured vehicles could be heard.

"The Reds have strengthened their positions," Roth concluded. "They appear to have rolled their tanks into position." It seemed the Soviets expected trouble.

Roth was anxious about the reception that awaited them on the other side of the Bug, but he was in no doubt that Germany would prevail once things kicked off, because the forest behind him was quietly being filled with German tanks, artillery, and huge numbers of soldiers.

Rumours of attack dates spread among the soldiers on the front line. On 19th June, Roth noted in his diary: "Hurray! The greatest battle of all times will begin tomorrow!" He was as sure of victory as Hitler.

However, the attack didn't begin until 22nd June. At 03.15, gunfire lit up the morning sky, while Roth and his comrades, pale and tense, huddled together in their foxholes. Soon the

infantry would cross the river and pave the way for the panzer divisions to advance into the Soviet hinterland.

The minutes dragged by. Then, at 03.30 exactly, a whistle finally blew – the signal! Hans Roth jumped out of his foxhole and sprinted the twenty metres between him and the inflatable boats that had been brought down to the riverbank under cover of darkness.

The soldiers quickly reached the far side, but now faced a Soviet machine gun. Gunfire crackled as the first casualties fell, lifeless to the ground. The Germans fought fiercely over the barbed-wire barricades and silenced the weapon. Roth's group headed for the bunkers ahead. Operation Barbarossa was underway.

### Stalin was caught unawares

The invasion came as a shock to Stalin. Despite several warnings, he'd believed that the Germans wouldn't be ready to attack until 1942 at the earliest; in fact, the Soviet dictator thought they might never attack. Stalin was distrustful by nature but had convinced himself that his counterpart in Berlin was too dependent on Soviet resources to start a war. Over the past two years, Soviet supplies of oil, minerals and food had kept the Wehrmacht and Germany's war production industries running. It never occurred to Stalin that Hitler planned to take direct control of the precious resources by force.

The Red Army was in the middle of a major reorganisation and was caught off guard. During the first day of operations, the Luftwaffe destroyed 1,811 aircraft,

1,489 of which were on the ground. As the German infantry advanced, they encountered illuminated outposts, which were even decorated with portraits of Stalin and red flags.

Few Soviet units had sharpened their readiness in response to the rumours of German troop movements. Numerous bunkers were neither complete nor fully manned, and there was a lack of weapons everywhere. Soviet reservists were rushed to the front line. Russian police officer Nikolai Yangchuk was posted to Brest (now in Belarus), a short distance north of where Hans Roth had crossed the river earlier in the morning. Here, he experienced a typical scene when a thousand men arrived at the train station.

"Don't we get any rifles?" asked the newly arrived soldiers.

"Get to the front," they were told. "You will find some weapons there." The troops had no option but to advance unarmed. At their posts, they had to ►



Propaganda used all channels. Romanticised images of the German blitzkrieg even featured on postcards.

POL/FOTO/CORBIS





**Most German troops advanced on foot and relied on horses to move materiel like ancient armies. The panzer divisions only made up a small fraction of their forces in World War II.**

wait until someone else was hit so they could take their weapon.

The garrison at Brest's old citadel was just as poorly equipped to withstand a German attack. The 19th century fortress could, on paper, accommodate 8,000 Soviet soldiers, but on the morning of 22nd June, just 3,500 men were present. Nikitina Archinowa was married to a Red Army officer and lived in one of the garrison's forts.

She was abruptly awoken by the sound of exploding shells and grenades. She threw on a coat and hurried out on to the street with her children, where she stopped to take in the nightmarish scene. German bombers swarmed overhead, dropping bombs on the fortress. Men, women, and children ran around in confusion, seeking cover. On the ground in front of Archinowa lay a young woman and her son. They were both dead.

## Everything went to plan

Operation Barbarossa's strategy was to attack along three axes. Army Group North was to advance through the Baltic countries, heading for Leningrad. At the opposite end of the front, Army Group South was ready to occupy Ukraine, the Soviet Union's bread basket. Between the two stood Army Group Centre.

Army Group Centre, which contained over half of all German panzer divisions in the east, could advance faster and further than the other two groups. At Moscow, the tanks would turn north and south, and

penetrate deep behind the Soviet units that faced Army Groups North and South. The Red Army would be surrounded and destroyed.

Military plans rarely survive the harsh realities of the battlefield, but Operation Barbarossa ran like clockwork for the first few weeks. Once again, the panzer divisions outmanoeuvred an enemy that, on paper, was far stronger.

The Red Army had more tanks, more planes and more guns. Even the new Soviet T-34 tank turned out to be far better than anything the Germans had in their arsenal. Only the German infantry surpassed its opponent in terms of numbers. But the Wehrmacht's real strength lay in its training, experience, and effective radio communications. The Soviets possessed only a handful of radios and most tanks communicated using flags.

Operation Barbarossa followed the standard template for blitzkrieg, which had been thoroughly tested in Poland and France. In just a few days, Army Group Centre surrounded the Belarusian cities of Bialystok and Minsk, cutting off over 300,000 Soviet soldiers. Panzer divisions left them to the German infantry and rushed on towards Smolensk. By mid-July, the city was surrounded, and two weeks later, the last pockets of resistance were suppressed.

## Germans overstretched themselves

The list of German-captured cities grew almost daily: Sithomir, Chernobyl, Uman, Velikie Luki and Tallinn fell, and Leningrad and Kiev were quickly surrounded, too. Yet despite the

## Blitzkrieg secured huge German victories

**The blueprint for early German triumphs involved 'pocket battles', in which enemy forces were surrounded and crushed.**

**1 Surprise** was the key to the German blitzkrieg. The enemy must not know from where or when the attack would come, giving it time to reinforce itself behind the front. Offensives therefore began only with brief bombardments, while the Luftwaffe focussed on attacking enemy airfields.

**2 Breaking through** the enemy's front positions was a job for the infantry. Once the soldiers had punched holes in the front line, the German tanks could roll through and continue into the hinterland. The tanks were accompanied by soldiers and guns on trucks and were able to summon help from the air to remove any resistance in their path.

**3 The enemy's main force** was surrounded once the German panzer forces met up behind them. With enemies on all sides, defences began to collapse, with the chaos making it difficult to organise breakouts. Meanwhile, the German panzer divisions continued their blitzkrieg.

**4 The forces trapped** in the pocket were defeated by the infantry. The trapped army was under constant pressure so it couldn't break out to threaten the long, vulnerable supply lines to the panzer forces. With no escape routes or supplies, the trapped units would be forced to surrender.



26th August – 1st October



### 3rd Offensive: Massacre near Kiev



Ahead of Leningrad, **Army Group North** advances slowly through difficult terrain of deep forests and large swamps. Hitler decides to starve the city rather than capture it.

**Army Group Centre** halts its offensive. The infantry divisions get a much-needed rest, while strong panzer forces head south to support Army Group South.

Reinforced by Army Group Centre, **Army Group South** is ready to crush the Soviet

forces at Kiev. The Red Army has gathered over 600,000 men in the area around the city, and the German plan is to capture them all in a huge pocket. Two German panzer forces set off from the front north-east and south-east of the city, and the trap snaps shut when they meet on 16th September. The Soviet troops put up fierce resistance, but by the end of the month it's all over. Hundreds of thousands are forced to surrender.

growing tally of German triumphs, serious problems began to emerge.

Had Operation Barbarossa been planned with less complacency, Hitler and his generals could have foreseen them. The German infantry was constantly struggling to keep up with the advancing panzer divisions. The soldiers woke in the middle of the night and marched until late in the evening – usually in roadside fields, to keep out of the way of the long columns of motor vehicles. With blood-shot eyes, cracked lips, and faces smeared with sweat and dust, they pressed

onward – thirty, forty, fifty or even sixty kilometres a day in the summer heat, carrying weapons and heavy backpacks. Every now and then, the march was interrupted by intense fighting.

“It’s getting serious now,” Hans Roth wrote in his diary on 13th July. For the first time in days, he’d had a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. Like many of the millions of German soldiers heading

east, he was exhausted: “I could cry out of anger and frustration. Nothing works anymore. My body does not want to co-operate any longer. My nerves are singing like the wires of a telegraph. Will I ever see my home again?”

#### Disaster loomed

The Battle for Brest was an ominous sign for the Germans. Their panzer ►



General Heinz Guderian

German panzer generals like Guderian led from the front line. Here they could best coordinate their forces' attacks.

SCALA/BNK & GETTY IMAGES



*The Nazis did not devote many resources to care for the millions of prisoners they took in the first months of Operation Barbarossa.*

ULLSTEIN BILD

## Soviet prisoners of war marched to death

**Hitler waged a war of extermination on the Eastern Front. Prisoners of war died in their thousands on their way to the camps.**

**G**erman panzer forces repeatedly surrounded Soviet armies. As a result, as many as 5.7 million Red Army troops ended up in German captivity during World War II. Of those, between 2.7 and 3.3 million died before the war's end in 1945.

As early as March 1941, Hitler had made it clear to his generals that Operation Barbarossa was the start of a war of extermination against Communism and the Soviet people. During the showdown, no international laws of war would apply.

The Germans literally let endless columns of prisoners of war march themselves to death. They received almost no food or drink while marching on foot to the prison camps, and even men in good health

succumbed along the way. If a soldier lacked the strength to continue, he was shot on the spot by the guards.

In the camps, conditions were rarely better. From early morning to late evening, the days consisted of hard labour, which burned off more calories than the meagre diet could replace. No one cared about the basic needs of the prisoners, and the piles of corpses grew.

German army units and the SS also hunted down political commissars, Jews and other 'inferiors' among the prisoners. Up to 600,000 prisoners of war were executed in the custody of the Germans, and this brutal conduct derived from orders originating from the highest place: Hitler himself.

divisions were already rolling into Smolensk, over 600 km to the east, when the fortress finally fell on 30th July 1941.

By that time, the Soviet garrison had held out for six weeks. The German 45th Infantry Division had entered the old fortress on 22nd June only to be met by deadly fire from snipers in basement windows, on roofs and in trees. The attackers withdrew that night after losing 311 men, equivalent to two-thirds of the division's total losses during the campaign in France the previous year. The siege tied up a huge number of German soldiers, preventing them from participating in the advance to the east.

German losses grew at an alarming rate, because despite the confusion that reigned among the Red Army's leadership, Stalin's troops fought fiercely for every centimetre of Soviet soil. When the Germans crossed the Dubysa river in Lithuania and secured two bridgeheads on the other side, they were forced back by desperate counter-attacks the following night.

### Germans were "blonde beasts"

German units recaptured the bridgeheads the following day, which is when they realised how brutal the

**Only help from their comrades could save overworked Soviet prisoners of war from receiving a German bullet to the head.**



2nd October – 5th December



## 4th offensive: The Wehrmacht's final effort



Front on 2nd October

Front on 5th December

Along the Baltic coast, **Army Group North** travels the final kilometres to the outskirts of Leningrad. The city is now completely cut off.

Further south, **Army Group Centre** has regained its panzer divisions. Now Operation Typhoon begins – the offensive against Moscow, which will deliver a final hammer blow to the Soviet Union. At first, the attack goes smoothly – the panzer forces surround several Soviet armies, but bad weather, worn-out

equipment and growing resistance slow the advance. The Red Army has received massive reinforcements from Siberia, and on 5th December – with the Kremlin's spires visible on the horizon – the attack grinds to a halt.

In Ukraine, **Army Group South** is rapidly advancing across a broad front. By the Black Sea, German troops occupy the entire Crimean peninsula except for Sevastopol, which holds out until 1942.

battle on the Eastern Front would be. The Red Army had left several German corpses with their eyes gouged out or their genitals cut off.

Security behind the front was a growing problem. While the panzer divisions enabled the German war machine to capture vast tracts of land, the forests were still full of Soviet partisans and isolated groups of soldiers. They concentrated their efforts on ambushing vulnerable German supply columns, whose cargo was badly needed at the front.

"We are losing more people to the bandits than in the fighting itself," a German soldier wrote in a letter home to his family in early July 1941.

These partisan attacks gave Hitler the pretext for embarking on a war of annihilation. German high command ordered that the local population be terrorised to such an extent that "it loses all will to resist".

A Minsk citizen later described the Germans' treatment of civilians: "There were SS and police patrols day and night with sudden house searches. People were arrested on the slightest pretext, disappearing into Gestapo cellars and then whisked off to be shot. An atmosphere of constant fear reigned in the city."

Alongside the harsh regime, looting became part of everyday life on the Eastern Front. When the supply lines failed, German soldiers simply took what they needed. Eggs, flour, fruit and horses disappeared, and much else was just destroyed.

In a reversal of Nazi race theory, Stalin's propaganda labelled the Germans "blonde beasts"; Hitler's

Aryan troops weren't superhuman, but bloodthirsty barbarians.

### Generals wanted to change course

At Wolf's Lair – Hitler's military headquarters – optimism prevailed as the summer moved on. Hitler and his generals were broadly in agreement – except on one issue: Army Group Centre had advanced deep into Soviet territory and now stood at a crossroads. The panzer divisions stood ready – as planned – to switch course north and south to cut off the enormous Soviet armies facing the two other army groups. But eastwards lay an alluring target: Moscow. The choice was apparently between breaking the back of the Red Army or occupying the heart of Stalin's mighty empire.

Army Chief of Staff Franz Halder had tried to make Moscow his primary target from the very start of Operation Barbarossa. The city was an industrial hub in addition to its obvious symbolic significance. But Hitler thought differently: for him, Moscow was unimportant compared to the possibility of smashing the Red Army to pieces once and for all. The tanks were ordered to stick to the original plan.

The result was history's largest encirclement. In a giant pincer movement through Ukraine's agricultural landscape, over six hundred thousand Soviet troops were trapped in an area the size of Belgium. Soon the swastika flew over the Ukrainian capital Kiev.

With this victory in the bag, Hitler decided to grant Halder's wish anyway. On 6th September, he ordered the launch of 'Operation Typhoon' – the attack on Moscow. The initial step was to

advance on both sides of the cities of Vyazma and Bryansk, followed by the encirclement of the last significant number of Soviet forces in front of Stalin's capital. But summer had turned to autumn, and the rains had transformed the Russian roads to mud, paralysing all traffic. Preparations for the offensive slowed as logistical problems grew. It wasn't until 30th September that the attack could resume and, as expected, large Soviet armies were captured at both Vyazma and Bryansk. But it would prove to be Operation Barbarossa's final great victory. The Red Army remained unbroken, ready to fight back stronger than ever – while ahead lay the icy, unforgiving Russian winter... ■



PHOTO/ULSTEIN BILD

As Hitler's tanks rumbled across the border, the Soviet Union mobilised its entire society for war. Factories were dismantled and moved to the Ural Mountains, and security forces ensured the country in front of the Germans was deserted.

### FURTHER READING

• Robert Kershaw: *War Without Garlands*, Ian Allen Ltd., 2008  
• Robert Kirchubel: *Operation Barbarossa – 1-3*, Osprey Publishing, 2003, 2005 & 2007 • David Stahl: *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East*, Cambridge University Press, 2009



## NORTH AFRICA/1941



Italy has suffered a major defeat to British forces in North Africa. Hitler chooses to send German tanks to rescue Mussolini's men, and the new Afrika Korps gets the tank general Erwin Rommel as its commander.

*The German general stayed with his troops at the front so he could quickly take advantage of developing opportunities.*

GETTY IMAGES & ULLSTEIN BILD

# Rommel outwitted the British in the Sahara

# DESERT



# British were pushed back 1,800 km

## 1 FIRST OFFENSIVE

Just a month after arriving in North Africa, Rommel attacked the British, despite being ordered to fight defensively. Read about Operation Sonnenblume on [page 48](#).

Afrika Korps landed in February 1941.

Mediterranean

LIBYA

In June 1942, Rommel reached El Alamein.

EGYPT

## 2 BRITISH STRUCK BACK

The British launched a counter-attack, Operation Battleaxe, to repel Rommel, but the Desert Fox outwitted them again. [Page 51](#).

## 3 FOX'S BIGGEST VICTORY

Fierce opposition at Gazala failed to stop Rommel, who was always one step ahead of the British. [Page 54](#).

# FOX

*The odds seemed impossible when Erwin Rommel arrived in North Africa in 1941. The British were winning victories everywhere, and Germany's Italian allies were useless. But the panzer general's strategies were a potent weapon, and soon even the enemy came to admire the Desert Fox's guile.*



BY CLAUD CANCEL

**L**ucia Rommel could tell that something was wrong even before her husband opened his mouth. The couple was at home, near Ulm, when two officers arrived. Having talked to the pair alone, General Erwin Rommel stepped out of the room to speak to his wife.

"In a quarter of an hour I shall be dead," he said bitterly. It was 14th October 1944, and the officers had just informed him that he was suspected of being part of the failed conspiracy to assassinate Hitler on 20th July. Rommel had been given two choices: go to Berlin to plead innocence before the Führer,

or commit suicide immediately to save his reputation and avoid reprisals against his family. Rommel knew that there was really only one option, however: suicide. He'd expressed his dissatisfaction with Hitler's strategies once too often to survive a trip to Berlin.

"They have brought the poison," Rommel told his wife of 28 years. "It will take only three seconds to act."

Lucia begged him to fight back, but there was no way out. Finally, they came together in a silent embrace. When

## British on Rommel

**General Archibald Wavell:**

"Rommel was a military phenomenon that can occur only at rare intervals."

the couple's 15-year-old son, Manfred, appeared, Rommel told him what he had just said to his mother.

"To die by the hand of one's own people is hard. But the house is surrounded and Hitler is charging me with high treason. 'In view of my services in Africa,'" he said, quoting

one of the visiting officers, "I am to have the chance of dying by poison... If I accept, none of the usual steps will be taken against my family, that is, against you. They will also leave my staff alone."

Rommel was escorted from the house moments later. He shook his son's hand

## First victory

**Operation Sonnenblume (Sunflower) in 1941 proved that tank warfare was all about speed.**

**G**erman-Italian forces broke through the British front on 1st April 1941 and accelerated forward. The slow-moving British generals were given no time to organise a new defence.

DAY 3

**2 BENGHAZI** is captured after a lightning attack across 160 kilometres.

DAY 7

**3 BRITISH COMMANDER** is captured by a German patrol. The situation at the front is so chaotic, he hadn't realised how close Rommel was.



**Rommel**  
120 tanks

DAY 11

**5 TOBRUK** is surrounded by Rommel's forces.



**British**  
150 tanks

DAY 8

**4 2,000** British surrender as Rommel cuts their escape route.

Mediterranean

LIBYA

EGYPT

Front line

BREGA

DAY 1

**1 ROMMEL** beats the British at Brega then divides his force in two. Both groups push forward, night and day.

0 50 100 150 km

**Soldiers without vehicles were useless in North Africa.**

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX



one last time and then climbed into the waiting car. Rommel didn't look back as it disappeared down the driveway.

Five minutes later, the driver pulled over. Rommel swallowed the poison and a moment after, Germany's legendary Desert Fox was dead.

### Rapid strikes were his speciality

The myths that later built up around Rommel were seeded during World War I, when he first demonstrated his unique sense of battlefield tactics.

Born in southern Germany, he joined an officer school in 1910, aged 18, on the advice of his father.

After graduating, he became a lieutenant and was in command of a detachment when he received his baptism of fire on 22nd August 1914 in a French village called Bleid. Rommel had advanced through dense fog to the edge of the village, where he hid the bulk of his unit before going on alone with three others.

Soon the party spied 15 French soldiers chatting and drinking coffee. Rommel and his three companions opened fire, and before the surprised men could reach cover, two or three of them were down. Fearless, Rommel stormed forward with his men.

However, they were soon forced to retreat by a hail of bullets from houses within the village. The place was occupied by far more soldiers than Rommel and his scouts had realised.

Back with the rest of his unit, Rommel considered the situation:

"Should I wait until other forces came up or storm the entrance of Bleid with my platoon?" he wrote later about his two choices. "The latter course of action seemed proper."

Rommel stormed into Bleid with his division and took advantage of the moment of surprise to drive the French out of town. The battle taught him a vital lesson: numbers were less important in battle than courage, initiative and determination.

During World War I, Rommel also discovered how disorganised and weak a unit on the run is. He used this knowledge, among other things, in the Battle of Longarone, in northern Italy, in 1917. At that time, Rommel had command of around 500 specialist trained mountain troops, whom he led forward at such a pace that they ▶

## The camera loved Rommel

The Desert Fox is remembered for his tactical abilities that have won him a place among the military greats. But people close to him also knew him as a touchy, self-absorbed man who was protective of his reputation. He didn't

mind featuring in German propaganda, and Rommel liked to pose for photos. Critical fellow officers later claimed that he was only at his best when things were going well and everything was succeeding.

### Goggles always on his hat

In most photos, Rommel wears goggles on his cap. They protected his eyes from desert sand, and at the same time looked good in pictures. The goggles became British booty. Rommel gave them to an enemy general who was captured by German soldiers in 1941.

ULLSTEIN/POLFOTO



### His vehicle was essential

Rommel loved being out among his troops. The soldiers shouted "Rommel is leading" when he appeared among his units on the front line. His preferred means of transportation was a half-track vehicle with radio equipment, so that he could stay in contact with his units.

BARCH 1011-784-0249-04A



managed to outmanoeuvre a far greater force of Italians.

The operation ended with a 10,000-strong Italian unit surrendering because the troops thought they were surrounded. Rommel lost just six men.

## The Desert Fox landed in Africa

It was exactly this type of initiative-bordering-on-recklessness that became Rommel's hallmark in North Africa in World War II, after rising to the rank of general and leading a panzer division to enormous success in France in 1940.

Rommel's obvious talent was the reason Hitler chose to send him to North Africa in February 1941 with orders to save the Italians stationed there. Hitler's allies had tried to take Egypt from the British, but had instead suffered a catastrophic defeat. The Italians had lost half of Libya, and

German reinforcements had to be urgently dispatched across the Mediterranean to prevent the British from taking the rest of the Italian colony. The mission was defensive, and Rommel was ordered not to launch an offensive against the enemy.

The German general only had a small force to send into battle in any case. The armoured unit consisted of just 150 tanks, many of them small and light models unsuitable for attacking a powerful enemy.

Rommel, however, did his utmost to make his strength seem greater than it was. Knowing the Italian base in Tripoli was full of British spies, Rommel ordered a parade as soon as he arrived.

Rommel's tanks roared through the city with exhaust fumes belching out behind them. Once each unit reached the edge of the city, it swung around and returned to the starting point via small roads, out of view of the spectators. The armoured column then drove through the city a second time.

As planned, British agents reported a substantial number of tanks were now sited in Libya.

Rommel showed similar cunning when he disobeyed his orders and attacked the British. He ordered a convoy of lorries and other vehicles to follow his line of tanks during their advance to help create a large dust cloud that suggested a much greater force was advancing. Some vehicles were even disguised so that, from a distance, they resembled real tanks.

The British abandoned their positions and scurried back eastwards.

## British couldn't take the pace

Hitler had placed Rommel in an odd position with respect to his allies. General Italo Gariboldi, commander-in-chief of the Italian Army in North Africa, outranked Rommel and had far more troops.

But, after a series of Italian defeats, it was inconceivable that a victorious German tank general should be under Gariboldi's command. An accord

was therefore reached that while Gariboldi formally had overall command, Rommel controlled most of Italy's mobile units. Given that it was only mobile troops that had any combat value in the desert, this meant that Rommel was really in command.

Using his German Afrika Korps and the Italian support troops, Rommel soon took the offensive, despite having received orders to the contrary.

"*Sturm, schwung, wucht*" was his fighting motto, which was repeated again and again by the German officers – "Attack, momentum, force."

Rommel demonstrated the practical meaning of the words every time the British stopped and formed a defensive line. Instead of making a frontal attack, Rommel struck the flank. His ability to read the landscape was unsurpassed, and time and again the British were beaten by an opponent who fought at a much faster pace than themselves.

Only when Rommel's supply lines became too long and his vehicles ran

out of fuel did he stop his offensive. A stalemate ensued until German stores were replenished. Then Rommel moved forward again, taking the city of Tobruk in a dramatic battle and penetrating all the way to El Alamein, just 100

kilometres from the large Egyptian port city of Alexandria.

Legends about the Desert Fox began to circulate, and Rommel started to gain an almost mythical status among his followers. The German and Italian soldiers noticed how their general was always in the thick of the action on the front line. He lived, sweated, slept and ate like his men. Several times, while driving close to the front in his command car, he met British patrols and only escaped by luck. Such courage won the respect of his troops.

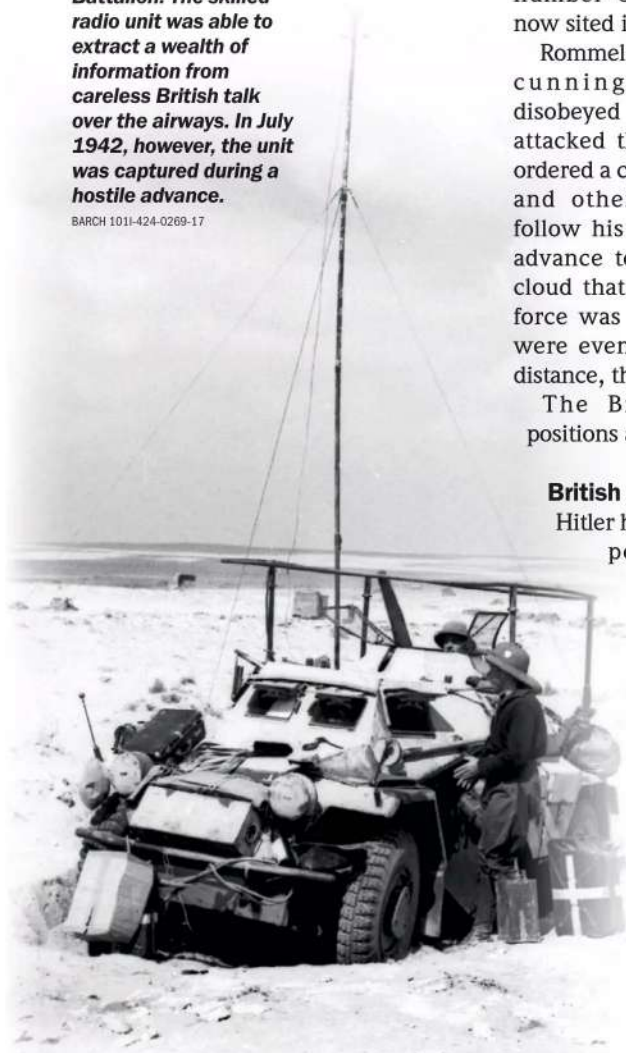
Rommel called the soldiers his "Africans", and they affectionately referred to him as Erwin. They shared a sense of being far from home and almost forgotten by the rest of the German Army.

The men knew full well that North Africa was not the priority when it came to distributing tanks, petrol and new supplies between the many fronts of Nazi Germany. But they endured

## British had loose lips

One of Rommel's trump cards in North Africa was the 621st Signal Battalion. The skilled radio unit was able to extract a wealth of information from careless British talk over the airways. In July 1942, however, the unit was captured during a hostile advance.

BARCH 1011-424-0269-17



## British on Rommel

**General Claude Auchinleck:**  
 "Our friend Rommel is becoming a kind of magician ... to our troops."



the privations, because they had the invincible Erwin.

"Always there is this strange magic strength that this soldier radiates to his troops, right down to the last rifleman," wrote war correspondent Baron von Esebeck about Rommel's effect on combat morale.

### Newspaper hero

In one of the peculiarities of World War II, the adulation Rommel enjoyed

didn't come just from the front-line Axis troops. When British soldiers sat in their foxholes, they talked about the German tank general with a mixture of fear and admiration. The men didn't discuss fighting the Germans or the Italians – they were fighting the Desert Fox, who was smarter, wiser and faster than the British generals.

A new phrase was even coined in the general's honour: British soldiers began to use the term "doing a Rommel" to

describe anyone who displayed an unusual degree of cunning.

Stories of the officer's abilities spread from North Africa to Europe and the US. In Germany, propaganda started to promote Rommel, and reports of his exploits often appeared in weekly newsreels. Admiration also crept into the Allied media.

A series of defeats in June 1942 led to the *New York Times*' headline "Rommel lectures the British on tactics", while ►

## DESERT FOX'S TRICKS Attack beats defence

### Turning the tables

**In 1941, the British tried to break through Rommel's defences, but once again, the Desert Fox responded with an offensive of his own.**

Operation Battleaxe was the British attempt to beat Rommel at his own game. The front in North Africa hadn't moved for a few months when British armoured columns advanced against German and Italian positions in June 1941. The tanks were supposed to break through Rommel's line and penetrate deep into the enemy's hinterland.

Rommel's defence consisted of fortified artillery positions and mines. These would delay the attackers, but the key was the tank reserve that Rommel intended to use to steal the initiative and force the British on to the defensive. Experience had taught him that an army on the run had only a fraction of its normal strength.



**Rommel**  
13,000 men  
200 tanks



**British**  
25,000 men  
190 tanks

**3 ROMMEL'S ARMoured** forces advance in an arc around the British units.

**1 BRITISH TANKS** launch a frontal attack on the German and Italian units along the front line.

**2 GERMAN GUNS** destroy half the British tanks during the first day of the battle.

**4 THE BRITISH** are forced to flee or be surrounded by Rommel's tanks. The Allied offensive has turned into a headlong retreat.

**Tanks were the decisive weapon in the desert landscape of North Africa, but they also consumed a lot of petrol. Rommel never had enough fuel.**

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX



George Patton, still a relatively unknown US tank general, stated "I want to fight with the Champ," referring to Rommel. Interest in the German became so intense that in 1943, US General Dwight Eisenhower – the man who later led the Allied efforts against Nazi Germany – grudgingly told reporters that Rommel was "a great general" but "not a superman". The words were a reaction to another article in the *New York Times*, which hailed Rommel as "The Man We Have to Beat". Even Churchill chipped in, saying: "We have a very daring and skilful opponent against us ... a great general."

In July 1942, Rommel mania reached such heights that General Claude Auchinleck, commander of the British Army in North Africa, issued an order to dispel the mythos surrounding Rommel. "He is by no means a superman," Auchinleck said, adding that it was "highly undesirable that our men should credit him with supernatural powers. I wish you to dispel ... the idea that Rommel represents something more than an ordinary German general ... We must refer to 'the Germans' or 'the Axis powers' or 'the enemy' and not always keep harping on Rommel."

Rommel also complimented the British – the private soldiers, at least: "Gentlemen, you have fought like lions," he told captured British POWs, "and been led by donkeys."

## Hope of victory was extinguished

But while Rommel was fêted, feared and inundated with love letters from German women, he was pessimistic about the war. By late summer 1942, his advance had stalled at El Alamein, and a desperate attempt to break through had failed. He knew reinforcements and new US weapons made the enemy stronger every day and that a British offensive was on the cards. Meanwhile, stretched supply lines meant his own army received only a fraction of what it needed.

Rommel's health was also suffering. Africa's harsh climate and the inhuman stress of leading from the front had given the formerly fit and tanned field marshal a list of ailments: chronic gastroenteritis, nasal diphtheria, circulatory disorders and hypotension.

In an attempt to recover, he returned to Germany for treatment. While there, he met with Hitler and realised, for ►

*"The British are falling over each other to get away. Our casualties [are] small."*

Rommel in a letter to his wife, April 1941.





*Erwin Rommel's  
rapid advance in  
an exotic land made  
for good propaganda  
in Germany.*

GETTY IMAGES





## Desert Fox's biggest victory

**Guns did the hard work at the Battle of Gazala in 1942.**

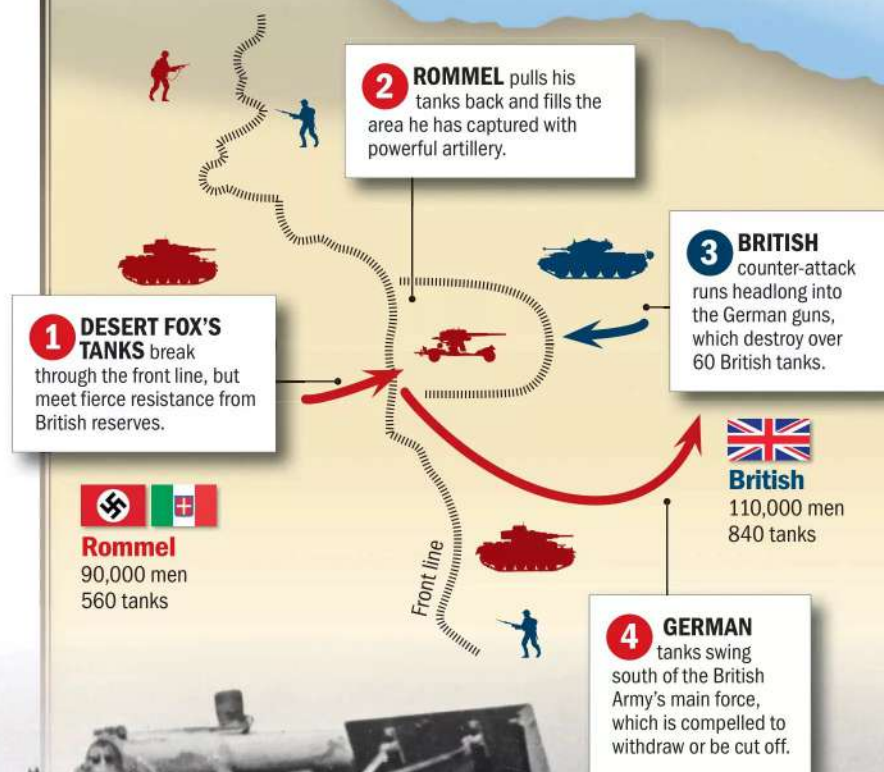
**Rommel saved his tanks for just the right moment.**

The Battle of Gazala in May-June 1942 was Rommel's greatest victory, and saw him outsmart a stronger British Army. The triumph demonstrated his ability to use his weapons to their greatest effect.

The Desert Fox avoided fighting with his tanks in order to preserve

his remaining machines. When the British attacked, he left it to his well-placed guns to stop them, while his own armoured forces drove around the British flank and caught them in a large pincer manoeuvre. The tactic worked and demonstrated his ability to think ahead of his opponents.

### DESERT FOX'S TRICKS Save tanks for later



the first time, that the dictator had a completely unrealistic picture of the situation at the front. Up until then, the two men had enjoyed a close relationship. Hitler distrusted many of his aristocratic senior commanders, but as the son of a teacher, Rommel was different.

For his part, Rommel admired the way Hitler had made Germany powerful again after the crushing defeat of World War I. Like others, he was also swayed by the Führer's powers of persuasion. But when they met in autumn 1942, Rommel's image of Hitler began to crack. The Führer refused to face reality. Instead, he promised Rommel that he would soon be back on the offensive with plenty of the new Tiger tanks, rocket launchers and supplies. But Rommel had heard it all before, and nothing ever changed.

The general explained that his tanks were being blown to pieces by US planes with 40-mm guns. The Luftwaffe chief, Hermann Göring, who was also at the meeting, scoffed at the claim: "That's completely impossible. The Americans only know how to make razor blades."

"We could do with some of those razor blades," Rommel replied, laying the casing of a US-made 40-mm shell on the table. The proof didn't help. The German Army had launched a major offensive against Stalingrad on

**Germany's dreaded 88-mm gun could pierce even the thickest British armour.**

ULLSTEIN/POLFO







### Handshake of death

*Rommel met regularly with Hitler, but as time went on, he became increasingly critical of the Nazi leader. His criticism contributed to his death in autumn 1944.*

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX

the Eastern Front, and the attack required all military resources.

### Offensive genius on the back foot

By the time Rommel returned to Africa, the British were tearing his Afrika Korps to pieces. The Eighth Army had a new commander, General Bernard Montgomery, who was attacking with far superior forces. He had 220,000 men and 1,100 tanks against Rommel's 115,000 men and 560 tanks.

The Battle of El Alamein turned into a German-Italian defeat, and Rommel's force was eventually pushed all the way back to Tunisia. In May 1943, the remnants of his army surrendered. Rommel himself avoided being captured, because Hitler had called him home, but the general never forgave the Führer for not allowing his Afrika Korps to be rescued in time.

In November 1943, the Desert Fox was given responsibility for the Atlantic Wall, the coastal defence that ran from North Cape in Norway to the Spanish border. It was supposed to protect occupied Europe from invasion, but "Fortress Europe" was just another of Hitler's fantasies. The beaches were only weakly fortified, and Rommel began a race against time to lay mines and build fortifications before it was too late. Again, Hitler promised supplies, but they never arrived.

The Atlantic Wall couldn't hold the Allies when they landed in Normandy in June 1944. The invaders were

temporarily contained in a strip of land along the coast, but Rommel knew that the Allies' superiority was too great. Sooner or later, the enemy would break through. He was one of the few German officers who had the courage to confront Hitler.

When they met, the Führer raved

about miracle weapons, but Rommel had had enough and demanded to know if Hitler actually believed the war could still be won. Hitler became furious. Hammering his fist on the table, he yelled that Rommel should stick to military matters and

leave political affairs to him. Rommel angrily retorted: "History demands of me that I should deal first with our overall situation!" Hitler's threw Rommel out of the meeting.

### Assassination cost Rommel dear

Back at the front, the Desert Fox began clandestine talks about Germany's future. He told one of his closest colleagues that if Hitler didn't admit that he had lost, then he was "going to open up the western front", adding "there's only one thing that matters now: the British and Americans must get to Berlin before the Russians do!"

However, he never had the chance to put his plan into action. On 17th July 1944, his staff car was attacked by

two British Spitfires. His driver tried to zigzag but was hit by bullets and the car smashed into a tree. Rommel was thrown through the windshield and fractured his skull, but he survived.

Three days later, while Rommel was fighting for his life in hospital, German officers involved in a conspiracy detonated a bomb at a briefing attended by Hitler. The assassination attempt failed, but the Nazis still carried out a brutal purge of the army.

In all, 4,980 officers and senior advisors were executed. The majority had nothing to do with the assassination, but the Nazis used the opportunity to crack down hard on sceptics. One of them was Rommel, who was on sick leave at home in October 1944.

### Hitler's crocodile tears

"In a quarter of an hour I shall be dead," Rommel told his wife when officers brought poison for his suicide.

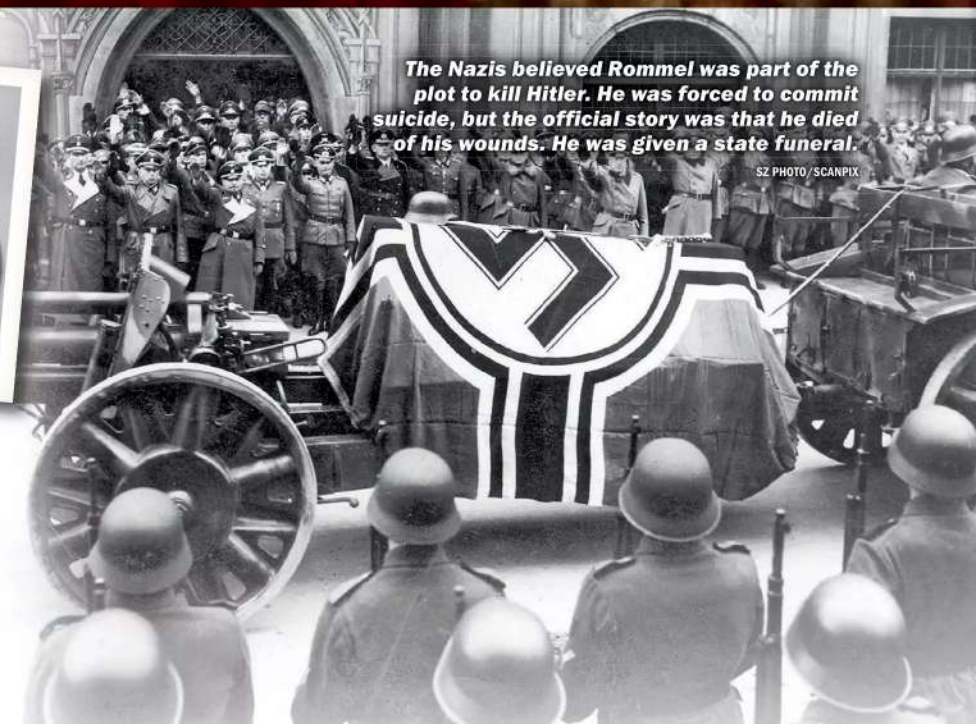
Two days later, Lucia Rommel received a letter from Hitler. It read:

"Accept my sincerest sympathy for the heavy loss you have suffered with the death of your husband. The name of Field Marshal Rommel will be for ever linked with the heroic battles in North Africa. Adolf Hitler"

The Desert Fox was dead. ■

### FURTHER READING

- Ian F Beckett: *Rommel: A Reappraisal*, Pen & Sword, 2013
- Daniel Allen Butler: *Field Marshal: Life and Death of Erwin Rommel*, Casemate, 2015



*The Nazis believed Rommel was part of the plot to kill Hitler. He was forced to commit suicide, but the official story was that he died of his wounds. He was given a state funeral.*

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX



THIRD REICH AT WAR



History's biggest

**TANK**



A black and white photograph of a Soviet tank, likely a T-34, is the central focus. The tank is angled towards the left, with its main gun barrel pointing forward. In the upper left background, a large, yellow hammer and sickle emblem is visible against a red field. The overall image has a grainy, historical quality.

**IN A FINAL ATTACK ON**  
*the Eastern Front in 1943,*  
*Hitler ordered the German*  
*Army to capture the city of*  
*Kursk. But the Soviets were*  
*well prepared. The battle of*  
*Kursk culminated as*  
*thousands of tanks*  
*clashed south*  
*of the city.*

**BATTLE**



BY JEPPE NIBYE

**S**oviet soldier Pavel Krylov drowsily shielded his eyes and looked up at the silhouette of a man trying to shake him from his slumber. The soldiers in the cramped trench near the village of Prokhorovka, approximately 100 kilometres south of the city of Kursk in Russia, were ordered to get up. After more than a week of gruelling battles against German forces on the Eastern Front, 20-year-old Krylov was lucky to be alive, but the early call before dawn on 12th July 1943 heralded yet another day on the battlefield.

"One hour before the attack. Eat something," commanded the unknown figure. The events of the day that followed would be the worst of Krylov's entire life. Before long, history's biggest ever tank battle would transform the region's beautiful, golden cornfields into a bloody inferno.

## Pincer to overcome the enemy

Just over a week earlier, on 4th July 1943, the German commander-in-chief on the Eastern Front had ordered his forces to mount a large-scale summer offensive to secure Nazi Germany's victory in the east and restore morale after the crushing defeat at Stalingrad six months earlier. The Third Reich's foremost strategist, Erich von Manstein, had devised a pincer manoeuvre, code-named Operation Citadel, to surround the Red Army's advancing front at Kursk. In this way, the Germans would



ILLUSTRATION

**Hitler ordered 2,928 tanks and self-propelled guns to capture the area around Kursk. The attack was Germany's largest tank assault on the Eastern Front.**

decrease the Soviet Union's own opportunities for a summer offensive, shorten the front line and give the war-weary German troops much-needed respite. In the best blitzkrieg style, the Germans would overpower the enemy with lightning-fast surprise attacks.

But on the other side of the front, the invincible Soviet Marshal Georgy Zhukov had known about the Germans' plans for months, thanks to the help of a secret agent within the enemy's ranks. A plan to break the German Army once and for all was carefully prepared. Using six lines of defence, the Red Army would sneak up on the attackers and destroy the dreaded tanks that formed the Wehrmacht's backbone. The Germans would have to aim well – for every Soviet soldier shot, five fresh ones would march forward. The price of Zhukov's strategy would be an unprecedented loss of materiel and human life. But unlike the enemy, the Soviet Union could quickly replace those lost. Nazi Germany, on the other hand, would lose its dominance on the Eastern Front for ever.

## Germans broke through defence

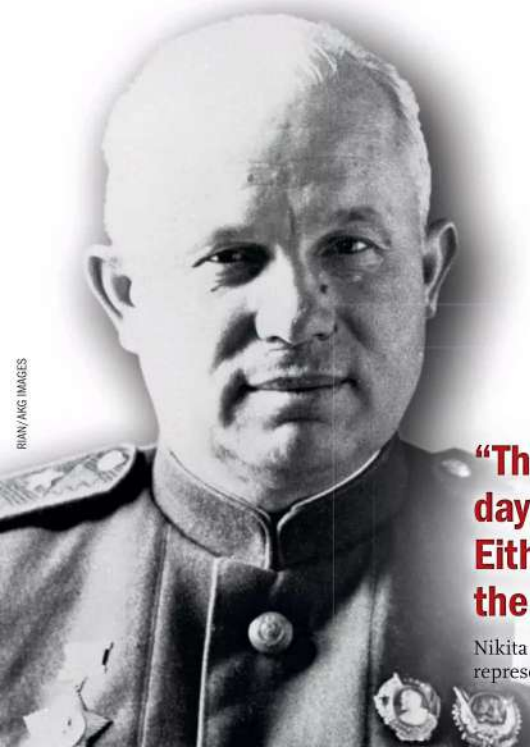
With General Walter Model and Colonel-General Hermann Hoth at the helm in the north and south respectively, the German forces were already biting through the lines of

defence on 5th July. But even though Hoth and his soldiers had reached just 25 kilometres south of Kursk, the Red Army leadership's confidence remained intact. Admittedly, the Germans had broken through the first three and most heavily fortified lines of defence, but there were still three more, and soon Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov would stop them permanently at the village of Prokhorovka.

## Luftwaffe surprised Soviet forces

After seven days of intense fighting, Pavel Rotmistrov drove through Prokhorovka. It was just before dawn on 12th July 1943, and all was quiet on the battlefield. The lieutenant general only stopped when he reached the 29th Tank Corps' position, south of the small town, on a hill covered with fruit trees. From here, Rotmistrov had a perfect view of the battlefield filled with ripened cornfields, across which the Psel River wound like a serpent. He panned his binoculars over the Soviet troops and then let his gaze fall on the enemy. Almost 600 tanks from three SS panzer divisions were facing him. But he had 900.

Naturally, Rotmistrov's men were growing impatient. However, just as the clock ticked past 06.00, and he was about to issue the order for the Soviets' planned surprise attack, a swarm of German fighter planes appeared like a black cloud in the already overcast sky. Several bombers swiftly followed on their tail – the Germans had outsmarted him. The ominously silent battlefield suddenly erupted in a deafening roar as bombs rained down on the Soviet troops. Rotmistrov watched as the ►



**"The next two or three days will be terrible. Either we hold out or the Germans take Kursk"**

Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's political representative at Kursk



# Nazis wanted to cut off Kursk

The Germans wanted to surround the front-line Soviet troops at the city of Kursk using a giant pincer manoeuvre code-named Operation Citadel. General Walter Model was to attack from the north and General Hermann Hoth from the south, until they reached Kursk in the middle.

CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIE



## Model struck from north

General Walter Model oversaw all five corps of both infantry and armoured divisions and an air fleet. The strategy was to let the infantrymen pave the way before the German tanks rolled forward.



Model's ambition to reach Kursk in under ten days were dashed.



## GERMANS

TROOPS 780,900



TANKS 2,928



ARTILLERY 9,966



AIRCRAFT 1,800



## Hoth struck from south

Colonel-General Hermann Hoth realised that his 4th Panzer Army's weakness was its lack of infantrymen. So, he sent his tanks – around 35 per kilometre of front line – as the vanguard, to drive an armoured wedge into the Soviet defences.



## Kursk's answer to Stalingrad

On 7th July 1943, German and Soviet forces clashed in the town of Ponyri. Here the Soviets showed their strength in a battle that lasted until 12th July. The Germans' futile struggle and huge losses evoked memories of Stalingrad.



## SOVIETS

TROOPS 1,910,361



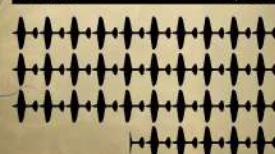
TANKS 5,128



ARTILLERY 25,013



AIRCRAFT 3,549



## Soviets let Nazis bleed to death

The Germans had more luck to the south than the north of Kursk, advancing faster than the Soviets expected, but on 12th July, the Red Army launched its deathblow against the German summer offensive during the Battle of Prokhorovka.

## OBSTACLES FOR GERMANS

### SPY revealed attacks

In April 1943, spy Rudolf Roessler, code-named Lucy, intercepted the Nazis' plans to take Kursk, and immediately passed the confidential information to Moscow. A mere 24 hours after Hitler had ordered the operation, Stalin knew about it. Roessler never revealed his source, who was just known as "Werther", but suggested that he was a senior officer in the German Army. Even today, no one knows who Werther was.

### HITLER delayed operation

Everyone in the German general staff knew that a victory at Kursk had to be secured with a swift surprise attack. Yet Hitler repeatedly postponed the operation, firstly because of muddy roads, but also because of the Soviet fortifications. The Führer wanted to wait for his new 'wonder weapons', such as the Panther, Tiger and Ferdinand tanks that were due off the production lines. The attack was postponed from mid-April to 5th July.

By postponing the attack several times, Hitler lost the element of surprise.



German tanks began heading towards his lines.

In the trench of Soviet soldier Pavel Krylov, who'd been so rudely awakened that morning, the men were preparing to charge towards the enemy. Out of the corner of his eye, Krylov suddenly caught sight of one of the German dive-bombers – a Stuka – before it plummeted and released its deadly cargo. He heard only a warning cry and then saw the ground in front of him rise up. If Krylov hadn't known better, he'd have thought that a giant had grabbed hold of the battlefield and shaken it. Dazed, he heard a roar of orders to stand up. Krylov was just coming to his senses when he looked towards the enemy's lines and, to his great horror, saw a tightly formed row of enemy tanks approaching like a tidal wave.

Rotmistrov's plan to strike first had crumbled. He found only a little consolation in the fact that the German tanks were driving straight into the storm of grenades and rockets that had been planned to precede his own surprise attack. However, the German tanks – led by the fearful Tiger I – were spreading out, to avoid becoming easy targets. The vehicles' caterpillar tracks churned up dust and soil, leaving deep tracks through the yellow cornfields, which would soon be burning. At 06.30, the Soviet bombardment stopped as planned, and Rotmistrov finally gave the order to attack.

"*Stal! Stal! Stal!* (Steel! Steel! Steel!)" he commanded, and the Soviet tanks moved into gear. Gradually, they gained speed and rolled towards the enemy. Rotmistrov had previously ordered his tank drivers to drive at full speed, or they risked being blown to pieces by the German tanks' long-range 88-mm guns before they even entered combat.

## Grey-purple smoke warned of attacks

On the other side of the front, at around 06.45, SS company commander Rudolf von Ribbentrop tried to get an overview of the battlefield from the vantage point of his Panzer IV tank. He was the son of Nazi Germany's foreign minister and, despite being only 22 years old, had already excelled in battles against the Red Army in Finland. In front of him – behind a broad hilltop – rose clouds of exhaust fumes. Along the entire ridge, he could see the same grey-purple danger sign, which could

# T-34 was Soviets' trump card

**After costly experiences in previous wars, the Soviets developed a tank that enemy ammunition simply bounced off. The T-34 became the Red Army's most successful tank during World War II.**

## Firepower

The 76.2-mm gun could be lowered by three degrees and raised by 30. It was fired using a foot switch. The shot reached 1,800 metres.

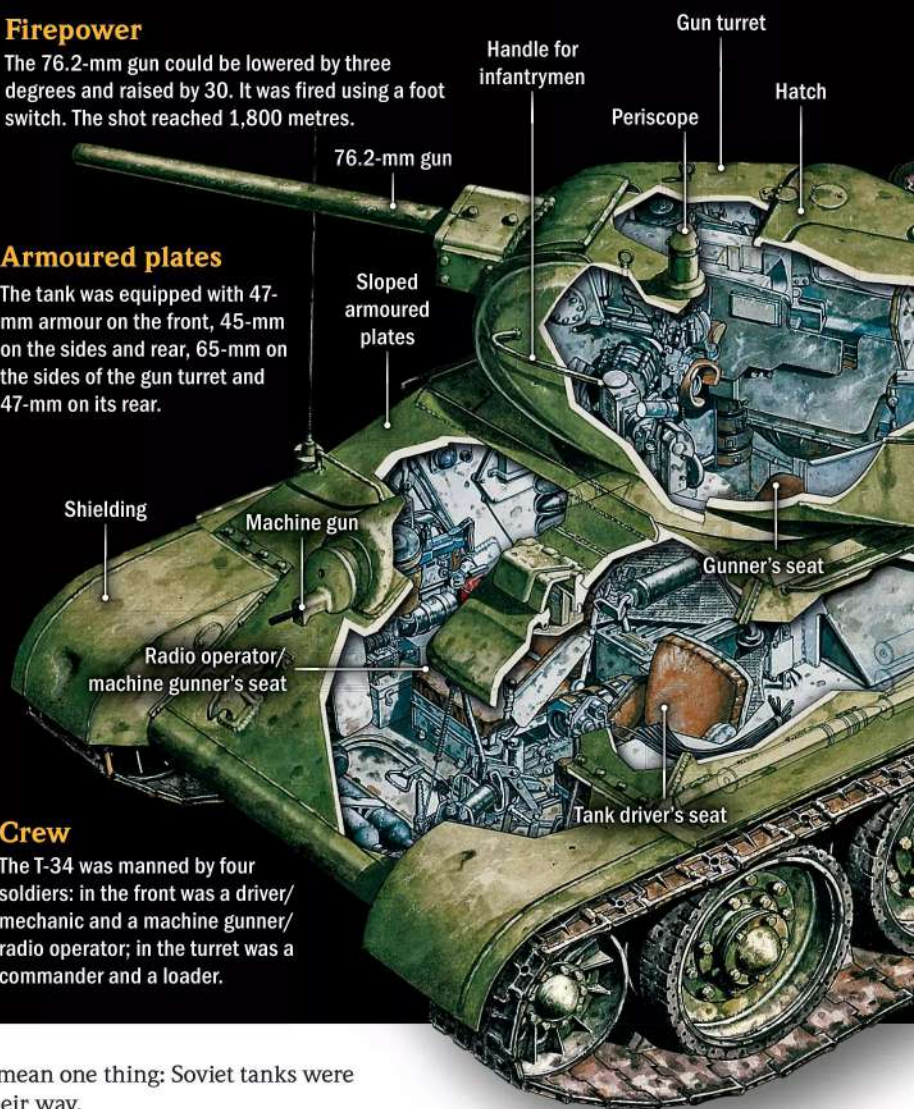
## Armoured plates

The tank was equipped with 47-mm armour on the front, 45-mm on the sides and rear, 65-mm on the sides of the gun turret and 47-mm on its rear.

## Crew

The T-34 was manned by four soldiers: in the front was a driver/mechanic and a machine gunner/radio operator; in the turret was a commander and a loader.

OSPREY



only mean one thing: Soviet tanks were on their way.

Ribbentrop radioed orders to his company to drive up the hill, and at the top he encountered the first Soviet T-34 tank, which was trying to cut off a number of German infantrymen on a hill 200 metres further on. Practised as they were in fighting, Ribbentrop's men soon found themselves following a familiar routine: the tank stopped, Ribbentrop specified a target, and the gunner fired a shell at an enemy tank. The process took only a few seconds, and within moments, Ribbentrop's company had destroyed several tanks, leaving the Soviet crews fighting a

desperate battle against the fire that was about to engulf them.

Out of habit, Ribbentrop looked around and was met by a sight that struck him speechless. In front of him he first saw 15, then 30, and then 50 tanks. Eventually, there were more than he could count. Soviet troops were hanging off the sides of the T-34s, using handles on the tanks' hulls.

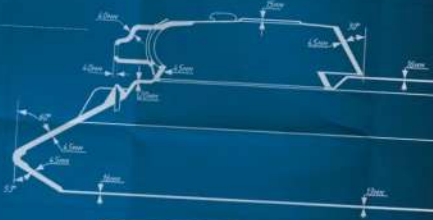
Ribbentrop's tank quickly fired a mortar at a T-34 that was just 50 metres away. Flames enveloped the vehicle, and its crew roared as they threw





## T-34 tank

Crew ..... 4  
Length ..... 6.73 m  
Width ..... 2.92 m  
Weight ..... 30.9 tonnes  
Top speed ..... 55 km/h  
Horsepower ..... 500  
Fuel ..... 0.65 km/l  
Weapons ..... 1 x 76.2-mm gun,  
4 x 7.62-mm machine guns



### Sloped armour twice as strong



**MOST TANKS** had vertical armoured plates.

**THE T-34** was equipped with sloped armour, which gave a 45-mm plate the same strength as 90-mm armour.



### Most manufactured tank

Over 35,000 T-34s and nearly 20,000 T-34/85s rolled out of factories during the war. The tank was constructed of fewer parts than previous models and easier to build. The Soviets produced more T-34s than any other tank.

## German tanks were meant to secure victory in the east

Hitler ordered up to 2,928 tanks and self-propelled guns to move into position to capture Kursk in Operation Citadel. Four models dominated the German divisions.

### Panzer III

Weight ..... 23 tonnes  
Top speed ..... 45 km/h  
Horsepower ..... 296  
Weapons ..... 1 x 50-mm gun,  
2-3 x 7.92-mm machine guns

The Panzer III with a crew of **five**, together with the Panzer IV, made up the majority of the German tanks during Operation Citadel.



### Panzer IV

Weight ..... 26 tonnes  
Top speed ..... 45 km/h  
Horsepower ..... 296  
Weapons ..... 1 x 75-mm gun,  
2 x 7.92-mm machine guns

Over **8,800** Panzer IVs rolled out of German factories between 1936 and 1945. It was the Germans most widely used tank.



### Tiger I

Weight ..... 54 tonnes  
Top speed ..... 40 km/h  
Horsepower ..... 690  
Weapons ..... 1 x 88-mm gun,  
2 x 7.92-mm machine guns

As the star of the armoured forces, the Tiger I's 88-mm gun could pierce a Soviet T-34 at **1,646** metres.



### Panther

Weight ..... 23 tonnes  
Top speed ..... 48 km/h  
Horsepower ..... 690  
Weapons ..... 1 x 75-mm gun,  
2 x 7.92-mm machine guns

Despite high expectations, **16** out of **200** Panthers had to be abandoned due to mechanical problems before the battle.



themselves from the burning deathtrap. Suddenly, the company commander heard a loud boom. The German tank right next to him had been directly hit on the hull and flames quickly took hold. Ribbentrop saw one of his good friends manage to get out of the vehicle, but then quickly turned his attention to the oncoming Soviets. The tsunami of Red Army tanks rolled on relentlessly. Tank after tank. Wave after wave.

### Shells pierced tanks

From his command post, Rotmistrov eagerly observed his tanks ploughing into the German panzer formations at high speed. The heavy machines

circled around each other in a dance of death. Neither side had time to move into a more favourable attack position. Shells sliced through the tanks' hulls like knives through butter. Rotmistrov could hardly tell which side was attacking and which side was defending. The only things that he could identify through his binoculars with any certainty were the burning ►

**"Every officer and every man must recognise the significance of this attack. Victory at Kursk must serve as a beacon to the world"**

Adolf Hitler immediately before the Battle of Kursk





# German tanks were lured into traps

As early as March 1943, the Soviet Army leadership, Stavka, suspected that the Germans would capture Kursk. Stalin ordered 300,000 workers to construct an ingenious defence system of minefields, anti-tank ditches, trenches and strategic lookout points from which Soviet troops could ambush the Germans.

WAYNE SOUTHWELL/CLAUS LUNAU/HISTORIE & RGAKFD

2

## Germans forced together

With a carefully planned obstacle course of minefields, deep ditches and natural barriers such as lakes, the Red Army **funnelled the Germans into prepared killing zones** that the Soviets could easily observe, and where the Germans were particularly vulnerable.



Deep anti-tank ditches held back the German tanks. The Nazi troops had to construct makeshift bridges to cross them.

## Rifles neutralised tanks

Anti-tank rifles could pierce armour up to 40 mm thick. The Panzer III and IV were therefore at risk.

## Traps not just for defence

Behind each line of defence, the Red Army placed divisions that could go on the counter-attack.

## Tanks lay in ambush

The Soviets hid 5,100 tanks and mobile artillery pieces behind strategic ridges.





1

## Lookout spotted the enemy

In preparation for the attack, the Soviets had built a 175-km-wide fortification consisting of six heavily strengthened lines of defence with around **5,000 km of new trenches**. Protected underground, Soviet soldiers could easily move from one position to another. Lookouts kept an eye on the enemy and were able to warn of attacks via radio.

*Soviet Lieutenant General Vasily Kryuchenkin keeps an eye on the German forces at Kursk.*



## Mines dug into fields

As many as 503,633 anti-tank mines were hidden in the grain and sunflower fields along the front at Kursk. The minefields channelled the enemy towards the death zones.

## Ditches stopped tanks

Deep ditches with steep sides served as an effective barrier against the German tanks.

## Mortar position

From the trenches, specially trained Soviet soldiers aimed 20,000 mortars (82-mm) and guns at the panzer divisions.

## Guns pierced tanks

6,000 Soviet 76-mm anti-tank guns awaited on strategic hilltops.

Soviet anti-tank gun

3

## Soviets sprung the trap

On command, the first soldiers stationed at a good vantage point fired anti-tank guns at the German tanks in the trap. **The attack served as a signal** for all the other Soviet units in the area to launch an infernal assault.





ANG IMAGES

Six out of ten German tanks on the Eastern Front were used in Operation Citadel in an attempt to capture Kursk. Here they fight in the crucial Battle of Prokhorovka.

tanks that were lit up like torches in the scorched fields.

Krylov was grateful for the fact that his division had already been preparing to attack when the Germans had started to advance. If the Wehrmacht had attacked just one hour earlier, all would have been lost. Even so, the Germans managed to push Krylov's division back more than 400 metres.

## Out of ammunition

In Rudolf von Ribbentrop's view, it was only a matter of time before his

infamous tanks defeated the Soviet T-34s. But a desperate cry from inside his own tank interrupted his thoughts:

"No AP [armour-piercing ammo] left." Whenever the loader needed more shells, the Panzer IV tank had to stop so that the gunner, radio operator and driver could hand him fresh ammunition from the store. Ribbentrop knew full well that if the tank stopped, he might as well have signed his own death sentence, so he ordered the driver to turn around and move behind a hill that offered slightly better cover. But before they could get that far, a T-34 showed up and stopped just 30 metres to their right. The enemy's turret was aimed at Ribbentrop, who found himself looking down the gun barrel. His own tank, however, was unable to fire, as the loader had only just received the new supplies of armour-piercing shells and was still stowing them.

"Step on it, now!" roared Ribbentrop. Immediately, the tank started up and manoeuvred around behind the enemy so only ten metres separated the two machines. The German gunner couldn't miss. The mortar hammered right into the enemy's gun turret, which flew three metres into the air.

Although Ribbentrop's company transformed plenty of tanks into

twisted wrecks, the onslaught seemed endless. And the commander's own vehicle was right in the middle of it. Ribbentrop, however, had an advantage: every German tank – unlike Soviet ones – had a radio. By calling his men, he might be able to prevent them from confusing him with the enemy.

"All stations: ... Don't fire at us!" he repeated over the radio. No answer.

The area was no longer a battlefield, but a slaughterhouse. Everything was alight, enveloping both enemies and comrades in smoke. An indescribable stench hung in the air. The Soviet T-34s shot at will and shelled each other.

## Ribbentrop turned around

Krylov climbed a hill. All around him the bodies of the dead lay in unnatural positions while the wounded cried for help. Some Soviet infantrymen further back provided a little support fire, but the German shelling was fiercer. Only at 13.00 did the Soviet artillery manage to get the Germans in their cross hairs from a strategic hilltop and send a rain of shells down on the SS soldiers. Several T-34s thundered up the slope, which they finally captured.

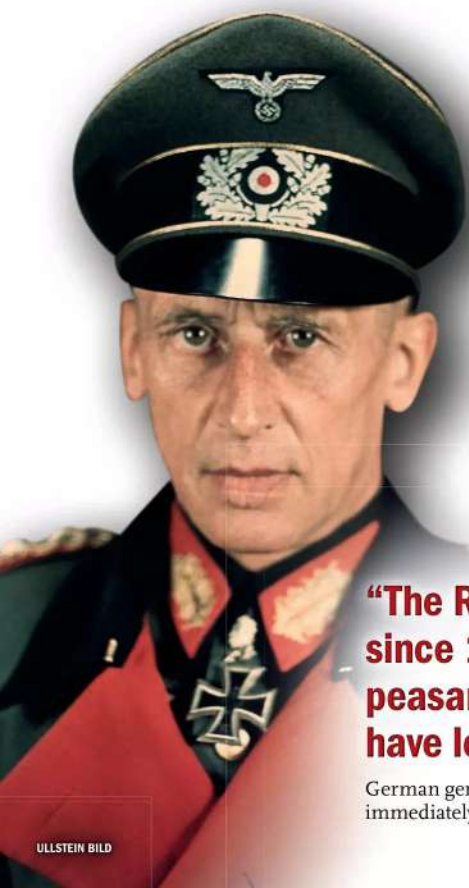
On the German side, Rudolf von Ribbentrop again heard the ominous message from inside the tank: "No AP left." The supply of armour-piercing ammo had run out again, so instead, Ribbentrop ordered his tank to target the Soviet infantrymen who, like the tanks, appeared in an endless stream. Suddenly Ribbentrop heard a large boom and shortly after a roar.

"My eye! My eye!" yelled the gunner. A shell had just hit the tank's sight. Luckily, it didn't penetrate the turret, but it hit the periscope with such force that the gunner was seriously injured.

Ribbentrop's Panzer IV tank was unable to fight on without a gunner, but it had destroyed at least 14 Soviet tanks. Hundreds of wrecked vehicles lay behind him as his tank drove to safety.

## Stalin raged over lost tanks

Rain hammered down as darkness settled over the battlefield. Pavel Rotmistrov could hear scattered gunfire in the distance, but he was more concerned about the storm of fury that the leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, was directing at him: "What have you done to your magnificent tank army?" Stalin demanded over the field



**"The Russians have learnt a lot since 1941. They are no longer peasants with simple minds. They have learnt the art of war from us"**

German general Hermann Hoth, immediately after the tank battle at Kursk



telephone. The question hung in the air, making Rotmistrov fear for his life. Stalin wasn't even aware of the whole truth: that 650 tanks had gone up in smoke in one day, while the Germans had lost just 17. Rotmistrov knew that, with his crippled vehicles, it would be impossible to go on the offensive the next day, so ordered his men to dig in.

### Germans kept in check

Lightning split the dark night sky with white flashes, and the boom of thunder replaced the bangs of shells. Despite the reprimand from Stalin, Lieutenant General Rotmistrov rejoiced at the storm, because by the next morning, 13th July, the battlefield had become a

sprawling quagmire that the German tanks could only traverse at a crawl. Rotmistrov let his artillery blast shells down on the advancing Germans, and the broken caterpillar tracks of the first Nazi tanks soon got stuck, while others steered directly into the minefields. Infantrymen were still advancing, but when 'Stalin's organs', as the Germans had nicknamed the Katyusha rocket launcher, fired their mortars, they fled.

To his delight, Rotmistrov also woke up to the news that the Allied landing in Sicily, which had begun on 10th July, had been a success. More than 160,000 soldiers had now gone ashore and secured a bridgehead in advance of the forthcoming invasion of mainland

Italy. It therefore came as no surprise when the Germans halted Operation Citadel later that day.

The Soviets had suffered huge losses but they were part of the calculated cost of victory. Although the Red Army had lost three times as many men as the Germans, six times as many tanks, and almost three times as many aircraft, the Soviet Union was still victorious at Prokhorovka. Nazi Germany had finally lost the battle in the east. ■

### FURTHER READING

● Lloyd Clark: *Kursk – the Greatest Battle*, Headline Review, 2011 ● Mark Healy: *Kursk 1943 – The Tide Turns in the East*, Osprey, 1992 ● Steven H Newton: *Kursk – The German View*, Da Capo Press, 2002 ● Steven J Zaloga: *T-34/76 Medium Tank, 1941-45*, Osprey, 1994 ● Tom Jentz & Hillary Doyle: *Tiger I Heavy Tank, 1942-45*, Osprey, 1993

# Inexhaustible Soviet Army prevailed

**Although the Soviet Union lost three times as many men as the Germans at Kursk, the Nazis had to admit they'd been defeated on the Eastern Front.**

**S**talingrad was the end of the beginning. But the Battle of Kursk was the beginning of the end. Such was Winston Churchill's analysis of the Battle of Kursk. Paradoxically, the German forces managed to kill far more soldiers, and destroy many

more tanks and planes than they lost themselves. For example, the Red Army had to leave 177,847 men and 1,600 tanks on the battlefield, compared to 'only' 56,827 men and 252 tanks among the German ranks. But the Red Army proved inexhaustible with regard to both men and materiel, and its size was its main strength. While factories in the Urals constantly churned out new tanks, the Nazis couldn't afford to lose any more. As the German historian Karl-Heinz Frieser put it: "It was not by tank duels that the Battle of Kursk ... was won, but by the production battle in the factories. The German Reich had lost the production battle long before the first shot was fired at Kursk."

## Citadel's Nazi losses

**56,827**  
soldiers lost their life  
on the battlefield



**252**  
tanks lay  
destroyed



**500**  
artillery pieces  
were destroyed



**159**  
of the Luftwaffe's  
planes were shot down



**The Germans had to face defeat after the Battle of Kursk. From now on, the previously victorious German panzer divisions were on the defensive.**

ULLSTEIN BILD



# Hitler's supergun

## would level London to the ground

*As the Allies succeeded in pushing Hitler back on all fronts, the Führer prepared a contingency plan: Germany would build the world's biggest gun and carpet-bomb London from the northern French coast. German engineers were in a race against time to make the gun ready and turn the tide of war in Hitler's favour.*

Forced labourers  
built around 7 km  
of tunnels.

The plant was covered  
with a **concrete**  
jacket 5.2 m thick.

**1ST FLOOR**

**2ND FLOOR**

The **side chambers**  
were easily  
replaceable because  
they could only handle  
a few blasts.

**FIRING RAMP**

The plant was on  
**three floors**. The  
bottom was  
connected to the  
cities of Calais and  
Boulogne by means  
of a railway.

**3RD FLOOR**

### MIMOYECQUES/1944



Fierce fighting has forced the Nazis to give up their plans to expand in the east. At the same time, Britain and the US are gaining a foothold in the West.

In one last desperate throw of the dice, the Nazis begin developing a series of 'retaliatory weapons' to turn the tide of war.



On 4th July 1944, a loud bang was heard from the coast in northern France. The explosion's echoes reverberated around the green hills near the small town of Mimoyecques, while a puff of smoke spilled from the cliffs where a large gun barrel had been hidden. An elongated shell fizzed over the sandy white beach and continued across the English Channel on its way towards London.

Around 93 kilometres from its launch site, the shell gradually lost speed and then crashed.

August Cönders and his fellow German engineers appeared satisfied, however. The shell needed to travel another 70 kilometres before it reached the English capital but it had just achieved its best test results so far. If everything went to plan, London could soon be bombarded with over 300 shells per hour. The news might mean the project finally gained acknowledgement from the Führer's headquarters and awaken new hopes of a German victory.

### Nazis wanted revenge

Construction of Germany's giant V-3 guns started in the autumn of 1943. SS soldiers made full use of hundreds of forced labourers from Eastern Europe to construct a gigantic underground facility in the rolling landscape around the northern French coast.

The plant included a tunnel system seven kilometres long, which went as deep as a hundred metres in some places. It was enclosed inside a 5.2-metre concrete 'jacket', which not even the Allies' most powerful bombs

could penetrate. The guns formed part of the *Wunderwaffen* (Superweapons) programme, which also included the V-1 flying bomb and V-2 rocket. The 'V' in the names stood for *Vergeltungswaffe*, or 'Retaliatory weapons'. The name was a perfect fit for Nazi propaganda, which claimed the superweapon would avenge the increasingly extensive Allied bombing of German cities.

The idea for the plant came from Hitler's Minister of Armaments, Albert Speer. The purpose of the giant project was to allow superguns to shell London from 165 kilometres away, breaking British fighting spirit and morale by inflicting huge losses on the civilian population. This was the only tactic that could turn the war and prevent the defeat that loomed on the horizon. Strategists in German High Command had known by early 1943 that only exceptional funding could prevent WWII being lost. One of the weapons tossed into the last, decisive phase of the war as a final hope was the V-3 gun.

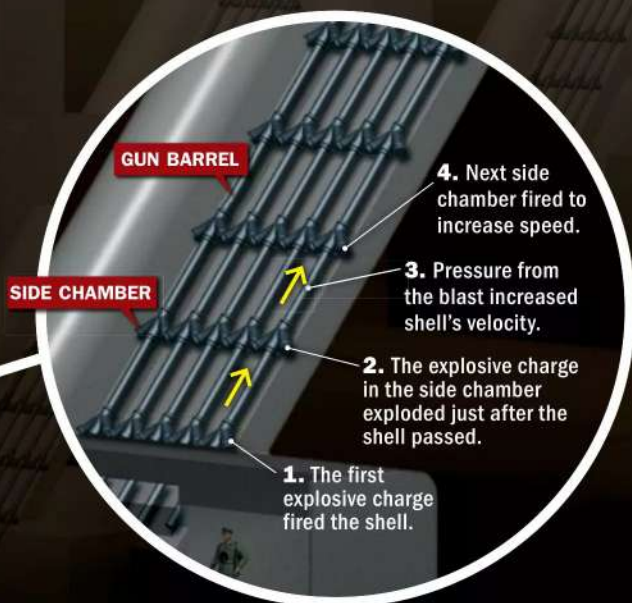
### V-3 could smash London

Once the entire facility at Mimoyecques became operational, the German guns ►

When the shell came out of the barrel, it was travelling at around 1,500 m/s.

The guns were protected by steel plates that were 20 cm thick.

The guns were placed 30 m below ground.



## Facility was one hundred metres below ground

The German V-3 plant consisted of a series of large tunnels under the hills on France's northern coast. The facility was covered by reinforced concrete and was one hundred metres deep in places. It was split into five sections, with five guns in each, but according to German plans, the plant was designed to support 50 guns. If completed, the facility could have fired on London once every 12 seconds.

CLAUS LUNAU



would be able to fire 600 tonnes of explosives at London – every single day. This was obviously a frightening prospect for the British. It meant that in just 14 days, the Germans could drop as many bombs over London as Allied aircraft had dropped over Berlin throughout the entire war. The V-3 might in very short order reduce the British capital to rubble.

## Guns used new technology

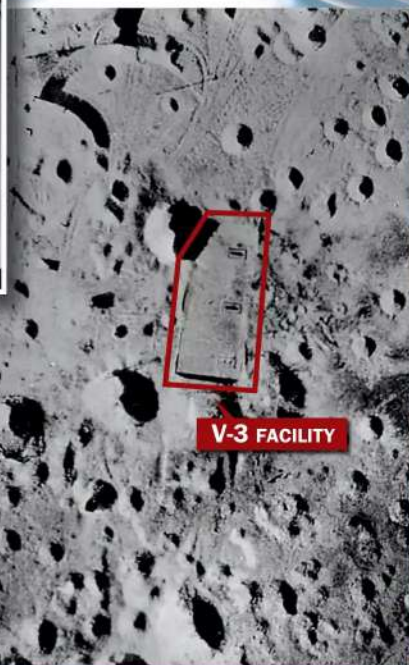
The V-3 gun revolutionised contemporary weapon technology. The new German guns had an unusual design based on completely different principles from conventional guns. The man credited with developing the weapon was German engineer August Cönders, who'd been inspired by trials the US Army had begun – and then abandoned – back in 1885.

Unlike traditional guns, the V-3 contained several side chambers. Inside these were explosive charges, which were designed to detonate at the precise moment the projectile passed. This ensured the pressure from the blasts – timed by advanced electronics – would constantly



The big Tallboy bomb solved British problems and smashed through the V-3 plant.

Craters made by British bombs left the area looking like a lunar landscape.



ROYAL AIR FORCE

## Heavy Gustaf fired giant shells

The V-3 wasn't the only German supergun. *Schwerer Gustav* (Heavy Gustaf) and its sister gun Dora were completed in 1941, and at 1,344 tonnes were the world's largest. The two guns could fire seven-tonne shells a distance of 37 kilometres, and could break through seven-metre-thick reinforced concrete. The guns were designed to smash through French defensive lines, but first

showed their value against the Soviets. They made their name inflicting huge damage on the city of Sevastopol in 1941-42.

The Gustav gun was so big that it had to be transported by 25 railway cars.



increase the projectile's acceleration until the shell flew out of the gun with an exit speed of around 1,500 metres per second. German calculations demonstrated the momentum should send the shells across the English Channel. The gun's design helped give the V-3 the nicknames *Hochdruckpumpe* (High Pressure Pump) and *Tausendfüßler* (Millipede).

Another unusual feature of the V-3 gun was that its barrel was smoothbore, designed to fire more 'flyable' shells. Conventional gun barrels featured 'rifling', which spun the projectiles so their rotation kept them stable in flight. The V-3's highly aerodynamic shells held course with the aid of stabilising fins, which were developed in the spring of 1944 by several companies – including Skoda and Krupp.

## Time was running out

The V-3's complicated technology was a headache for the Germans, and project leader Cönders and his large group of employees encountered major problems getting the guns to work. They'd been given unusually free rein to research the new approach, but by March 1944, German general staff were becoming impatient. Defeat loomed, yet Cönders had still not delivered meaningful results.

A group of inspectors visited Mimoyecques to view a demonstration

of the supergun, of which Hitler expected great things. They weren't impressed. The generals took charge of the V-3 project and relegated Cönders to an ordinary engineer. From this point on, work accelerated in earnest.

Within two months, the Germans began to see promising returns. Test firings saw the shells reach 80 kilometres – half the distance to London. During one of the launches, however, one gun exploded and damaged part of the facility.

On 4th July 1944, the Nazis were ready for another trial run. This time, the V-3 gun reached 93 kilometres. It was closer to its target, but time was running out. The Allies had already landed in Normandy.

## Threat of V-weapons grew

A month earlier, the Allies had been made brutally aware of the activities at Mimoyecques as well as other German reprisal projects along the northern French coast.

On the night of 13th June 1944, a major explosion at the railway bridge at Grove Road cost eight civilian Londoners their lives. A brand-new weapon had been introduced: the V-1 bomb, which was the first remote-controlled missile to be used in a war. Over the following days, the Germans conducted more attacks on Britain's capital with V-1 bombs. A single bomb



could level 20 terraced houses to the ground, and it left the British stunned. They could not put up any resistance to these new terror weapons – plain anti-aircraft defences were inadequate.

The German retaliation weapon moved swiftly to the top of Prime Minister Winston Churchill's agenda, and Britain's highest priority became destroying the locations where the weapons were produced and fired. The French Resistance had already informed the British about the activities of Mimoyecques in September 1943, but it had no details on the V-3 project, so the first Allied air attacks in November 1943 had little effect.

### Forced labourers drowned

At the end of April 1944, the Allied bombers flew again over the V-3 facility at Mimoyecques. The bombers were equipped with newly developed 'Tallboy' bombs – 5,443-kilogram deep-penetration bombs, specially designed to crash through the V-3 complex's thick concrete hood. But even this extremely powerful 'earthquake bomb', which detonated after penetration, was unable to smash through the thick concrete layer that protected the German plant.

On 6th July 1944 – just two days after the most successful trial run of the V-3 yet – the RAF attacked with more Tallboys, and this time three of the

bombs found their way through the shafts to penetrate 30 metres underground. One of them broke a corner of the concrete hood and completely blocked one of the shafts.

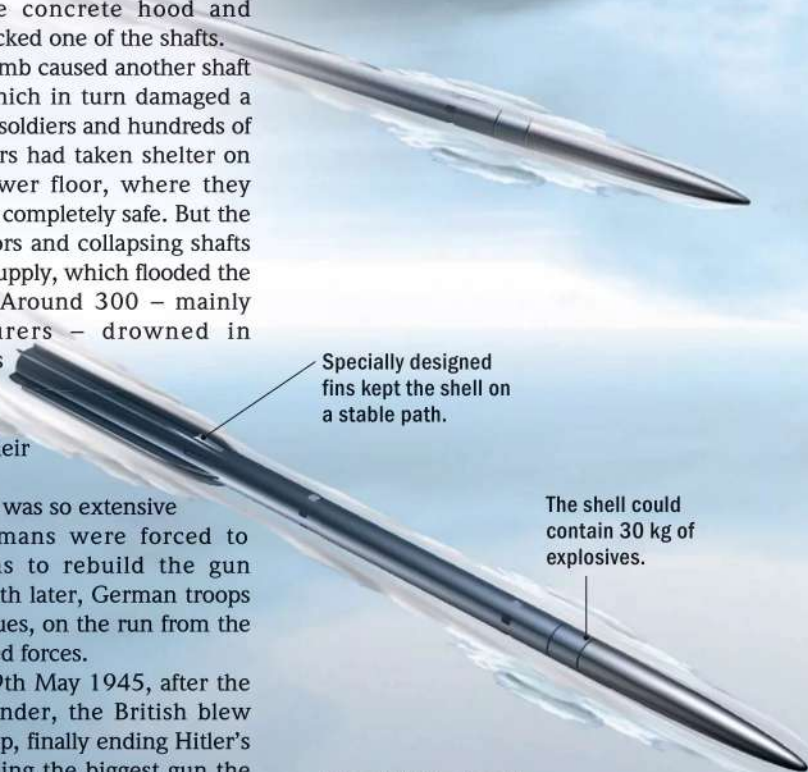
A second bomb caused another shaft to collapse, which in turn damaged a third. German soldiers and hundreds of forced labourers had taken shelter on the plant's lower floor, where they expected to be completely safe. But the extreme tremors and collapsing shafts burst a water supply, which flooded the lower floors. Around 300 – mainly forced labourers – drowned in the floodwaters and were buried in the ruins, where their bodies still lie.

The damage was so extensive that the Germans were forced to abandon plans to rebuild the gun facility. A month later, German troops left Mimoyecques, on the run from the advancing Allied forces.

Finally, on 9th May 1945, after the German surrender, the British blew the V-3 plant up, finally ending Hitler's dream of building the biggest gun the world had ever seen. ■

#### FURTHER READING

• Gary Hyland: *Last Talons of the Eagle: Secret Nazi Aerospace Projects Which Almost Changed the Course of World War II*, Headline Book Publishing, 1998 • Peter Haining: *The Flying Bomb War: Contemporary Eyewitness Accounts of the German V1 and V2 Raids on Britain 1942-1945*, Robson Books, 2002



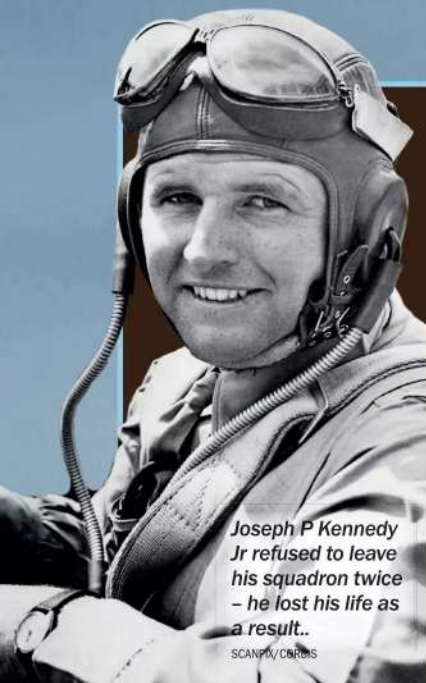
Specially designed fins kept the shell on a stable path.

The shell could contain 30 kg of explosives.

### The V-3 shell

The shells had a diameter of 10-15 cm, were 2.5-3.3 m long, and weighed 140 kg. They aimed to reach London from the north of France at speeds of 1,500 m/s.

CLAUS LUNAU



Joseph P. Kennedy Jr refused to leave his squadron twice – he lost his life as a result..

SCANNY/CORBIS

## Kennedy died during V-3 bombing

**Joseph P. Kennedy Jr – elder brother of future president John F. Kennedy – was killed during a bombing raid aimed at destroying Hitler's superguns.**

On 12th August 1944, 29-year-old Joseph P. Kennedy Jr sat in a Liberator bomber loaded with over ten tonnes of explosives that was heading to Mimoyecques.

The plan was to get airborne, point the plane towards France, and then parachute out over the English coast. The aircraft would then be remotely piloted on its way to bomb

Hitler's V-3 guns. Kennedy never escaped the plane, which for unknown reasons exploded and crashed.

The elder brother of Robert, Ted and John F. Kennedy had studied law at Harvard before enlisting, and in 1943 was sent to Britain to fly B-24 bombers. His squadron suffered major losses during the war, yet when the opportunity came

to return home in May 1944, he refused and persuaded his crew to stay. Three months later, he was again given the chance of going home, but refused a second time. He'd heard about the V-3 mission and wanted to be part of it. Kennedy was one of the most experienced US pilots, but the V-3 mission would tragically be the last for the young pilot.



The Allies paid dearly for

# Monte

*During the Battle of Monte Cassino, Allied generals were forced to admit that no troops in the world fought more fiercely than German paratroopers.*

POL/FOTO/ULLSTEIN BILD & GETTY/ALL OVER PRESS



ITALY/1944

As the Germans retreat on the Eastern Front, the Allies invade southern Italy and overthrow Mussolini's fascist regime. But the Allied forces' march north through the Italian peninsula soon meets stubborn resistance.



# Cassino

*A single mountain peak, containing a beautiful old monastery, stood between the Allies and Rome. For the soldiers on both sides, the battle for the summit was a throwback to the madness of WWI trench warfare. They would be forced to fight for every square metre of territory, while relentless shelling ensured life on the front line was a living hell.*

## A global army

The Allied forces in Italy were a patchwork of nationalities. All were thrown into the bloody battle of Monte Cassino.



France's Moroccan mountain troops had a reputation for murderous efficiency with knives.

## GERMANS FEARED THE NORTH AFRICANS

Of all Allied troops in Italy, the Germans had the greatest respect for those from France's North African colonies. French officers had learned that if they took the lead, their Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian privates would follow, regardless of cost. The men fought fiercely and endured hardship but were also brutal towards PoWs and civilians.



BY RASMUS DAHLBERG & ESSEN MONSTER-KJER

**T**he evening was cold and dull as usual for the German sentries on the slopes outside the city of Cassino, in central Italy. But the quiet was suddenly broken. Without warning, the mountainside filled with roaring figures storming forward. Higher up, dazed defenders frantically tried to regroup, but it was too late.

On the night of 12th January 1944, Moroccan colonial soldiers from the French Army quickly overran the German outposts. The fearless North African troops were in their element among the peaks.

"The Moroccan loves the night and the mountains," wrote Colonel Felix Lappara. "Rocks, thickets and sheer crevasses, all observed in the treacherous darkness, are his best allies and over a thousand years his eyes have become accustomed to not losing their way in the gloom. He knows when to creep forward and when to wait."

An entire Moroccan division was advancing through the Apennines, which ran the length of the Italian peninsula from north to south. Algerian soldiers also fought alongside the Moroccans, and despite the hostile landscape, they advanced rapidly. Once again, France's North African soldiers proved why they were considered to be among the world's best assault troops.

Soon after, the Germans deployed their own specialists: paratroopers, trained to fight in difficult terrain. The advance grew more arduous, and the Moroccans and Algerians had to fight with hand grenades and bayonets to capture every peak.

"It was no longer even a question of small-unit combat, but rather of one man against another in a terrain in which one could spend hours on end without having any clear idea of what was happening only ten yards from the

forward positions," read a report from the Moroccan division.

The battle continued after dawn, and over the following days, the North Africans fought hard to move forward. Despite their efforts, the offensive only advanced the front by five kilometres. And the Allies had only managed to reach the German defensive position: the Gustav Line.

## Geography was the biggest enemy

The slow progress was nothing new in the protracted Italian campaign. Ever since September 1943, when troops from the United States, British Empire and French colonies had landed in southern Italy, the Allies had been slowly moving north. The Germans had blown up all the bridges over gorges and destroyed river crossings. The narrow roads were blocked by mines, and from the ridges, hidden guns, mortars, and machine guns inflicted constant losses.

Field Marshal Albert Kesselring had promised Hitler that he could defend Rome until the summer of 1944, so he prepared the Gustav Line – a belt of positions from coast to coast, designed to bring the enemy's offensive to a halt.

The location of the Gustav Line had been chosen with care, because almost the entire width of Italy was covered in mountains at that point. The Liri Valley was the only place where Allied tanks could advance. First, however, they had to cross the Rapido River, and every metre of it was watched from the peaks behind the city of Cassino. From here, the Germans could direct deadly gunfire at the only usable road heading north.

Supreme Allied Commander Harold Alexander was aware of this, writing that "the road which leads to Rome is long and bristles with thorns". So, instead of breaking through the Gustav Line, Alexander laid out an ambitious plan that would make an attack on the ►



## LANDING

### The Allies cross to the mainland

In the summer of 1943, Allied forces occupy Sicily, and on 3rd September they land in southern Italy. Mussolini's fascist regime swiftly collapses, but the Germans continue to fight on their own, and halt the Allies at the Gustav Line.



## INDIANS WEREN'T TRUSTED

Soldiers from the British Indian Army fought on all fronts in World War II, and three divisions were deployed to Italy. But after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the British were suspicious of their Indian 'sepoys', so each division included British units along with Gurkhas – hardy Nepalese mountain folk whose loyalty was beyond doubt.



An uphill trek. Polish soldiers climb the steep slopes of Monte Cassino, while the Germans have a clear view from the top.

SCALA/BPK & OSPREY



# The Allies crept north

Churchill described Italy as Europe's "soft underbelly". He wanted to take Mussolini out of the war, but US leaders favoured tackling Hitler directly via an invasion of France. The stubborn Prime Minister got his wish, but the campaign became a drawn-out affair that the US deeply regretted.



## 1ST OFFENSIVE

**US troops brought to a standstill**

On 22nd January, a US division tries to take Cassino and Monte Cassino in one combined attack. Lack of numbers force the Germans to retreat to the slopes above the city, but US soldiers can't reach the summit before their offensive stalls on 4th February. *Allied losses: 2,500 men.*



## 2ND OFFENSIVE

**British imperial forces step in**

Battle-hardened divisions from New Zealand and India advance on 17th February, but the Germans repel all attacks along Monte Cassino's narrow paths, while down in the city the Allies are unable to bring tanks over the Rapido. The offensive halts with no gains. *Allied losses: 1,000 men.*



## 3RD OFFENSIVE

**Allies enter Cassino**

Allied forces attack again on 15th March. This time, they gain a foothold in Cassino to drive a wedge between the town and Monte Cassino. But as the battle subsides on the 19th, the Germans still hold part of Cassino as well as the monastery on the summit. *Allied losses: 1,100 men.*

## 4TH OFFENSIVE: CAPTURE

Liri Valley

Highway 6 to Rome

**1** British forces cross the Rapido on 12th May. Two divisions slowly fight their way through the Liri Valley on the German flank at Monte Cassino.

**5** The German withdrawal begins on the night of 17th May to avoid being surrounded by Allied forces.

Monte Cassino Monastery  
Hangman's Hill

**6** Monte Cassino finally falls at 10.20 on 18th May. The Polish victors hoist their flag over the monastery's ruins. The cost is 3,800 dead and wounded.

**2** Polish divisions are pushed back on 12th May by fierce German resistance in the heights behind Monte Cassino.

**4** The Poles attack again on 17th May and, despite heavy losses, succeed in pushing the German forces backwards, step-by-step.

**3** The offensive reaches Cassino on 17th May. After fierce German resistance in the Liri Valley, a British division advances to the station.

Cassino

Railway station

Rapido River

Gustav Line

Castle Hill



Germans' natural fortress unnecessary: by landing on the coast behind the enemy, he'd outflank the Germans on the Gustav Line.

On 22nd January 1944, boatloads of US and British soldiers streamed towards the coast at Anzio, which lay between the front line and Rome. But Kesselring's reserve units were prepared, and German elite forces quickly surrounded the bridgehead. The Allies took too long to break out, and the operation was a failure.

## US forces attacked in vain

In parallel with the landing, attacks began at the mouth of the Liri Valley, but the North Africans of the Free French Forces had barely begun their offensive when they were ordered south-west to help US troops, who were trying to capture the city and mountain of Cassino.

The hardy North African soldiers weren't impressed with their allies. And they quickly discovered that the enemy's respect for the US soldiers was just as low: "German... patrols were operating all over no man's land, throwing grenades and shouting insults at us," wrote Sergeant Ahmed Ben Bella, who later

became the first president of independent Algeria. "We soon realised, as the insults were all in English, that the Germans thought the Americans were still there. The Americans had hardly sent out any patrols and had not even been able to tell us where the enemy outposts were located."

At the northern edge of Cassino, a US division was trying to cross the Rapido River. But each attack was slowed down by mines and muddy riverbanks, while German machine guns kept battering away. Sergeant Major Billy Kirby described the horror: "We were under constant fire... It was the only scene that I'd seen in the war that lived up to what you see in the movies. I had never seen so many bodies – our own guys. I remember this kid being hit by a machine gun; the bullets hitting him pushed his body along like a tin-can. Just about everybody was hit. I didn't have a single good friend in the company who wasn't killed or wounded."

The Germans also suffered. A non-commissioned officer from a front-line regiment wrote in his diary: "22 January: I am done. The artillery fire is driving me crazy. I am frightened as never before... During the night one cannot leave one's hole. The last days have finished me off altogether."

After three bloody days, the Allies managed to cross the river. Slowly, the

German soldiers were driven up the slopes of Monte Cassino. But although reinforcements were thrown into the fray, the attacking force had fizzled out by 12th February. The front line was less than 400 metres from the abbey on Monte Cassino, but it might as well have been 400 kilometres.

The Allied commanders were frustrated, because the advance towards Rome was unable to gain real traction. A new attack was planned, this time with fresh Indian and New Zealand divisions to replace US forces.

## The monastery was destroyed

Prior to the offensive, Alexander made a controversial decision: he decided to bomb the medieval monastery on Monte Cassino. Until then, the magnificent building had remained undamaged, because the Germans had declared the monastery a neutral zone.

With its location on top of the mountain, the monastery could have played a crucial role, with its unobstructed views of the battlefield for miles around, just as batteries placed there could have covered the hillside and made an offensive even more difficult. But Field Marshal Kesselring wanted to save Italy's cultural treasures from the fury of war. The commander of the Indian division, however, didn't trust the enemy's guarantees and demanded that the abbey be levelled first. Alexander capitulated – soldiers' lives were more important than bricks and mortar.

On the morning of 15th February, the sky was filled with a swarm of planes. The engine noise was deafening as over 250 Allied bombers flew over Monte Cassino and dropped their bombs. The attack was the war's largest Allied air operation in support of ground troops to date. To a German lieutenant on the mountainside, the detonations felt as though a "huge giant was shaking the town".

Several hundred Italian refugees perished inside the abbey. The Allies had given advance warning of the attack via a leaflet drop, but the people within refused to believe the bombing raid would happen. In the days that followed, German radio indignantly protested against the Allies' action.

Strategically, the bombing was also a failure. German units near the monastery did suffer significant losses,



Albert Kesselring

## Master of the retreat

"Smiling Albert" Kesselring proved to be a military genius. When the Italians surrendered to the Allies in the autumn of 1943, Hitler wanted to evacuate the southern half of the country. But Kesselring refused. He planned to use the mountains to delay the Allies and hold Rome until the summer of 1944. Hitler gave him the opportunity, and throughout the rest of the war, Kesselring tied up large numbers of Allied forces on the Italian peninsula.

In 1947 he was sentenced to death for war crimes, but after protests, Kesselring was instead given his freedom in 1952.

**The ever-optimistic Kesselring was loved by his soldiers. After the war, he was active in several veteran organisations.**

POLFO/ULLSTEIN BILD



# Landing failed

**The Allies tried to bypass the Gustav Line by landing behind the German front. Instead, the troops in the bridgehead at Anzio were trapped inside.**

Allied troops encountered no resistance as they landed at Anzio, 50 km behind the Gustav Line on 22nd January 1944. The road to Rome was open, but instead of advancing, US General John Lucas ordered the landing zone fortified. He wanted to avoid a repeat of the invasion at Salerno in 1943, when German counterattacks had almost driven an Allied landing

force back into the sea. But in so doing, he missed his opportunity.

When Lucas finally tried to advance after nine days, his 70,000 men were blocked by an equally strong enemy force. German guns could reach every square metre within the small bridgehead, and the Allies were trapped until the Gustav Line finally collapsed in May 1944.

Two Allied divisions land unhindered but dig in instead of advancing.

Two German divisions race to the landing zone to form a ring around it.

Gustav Line

Two Allied divisions land unhindered but dig in instead of advancing.

**The Allies took it easy at Anzio. In so doing, they missed the chance to force the Germans in Italy to retreat.**

GETTY/ALL OVER PRESS

but the Indian division wasn't ready to attack until two days later. And as the soldiers began to climb the slopes on 17th February, they were met by deadly gunfire from the ruins that the Germans now occupied. The rubble proved to be excellent cover for the German machine-gun positions.

After catastrophic losses, the troops were ordered to halt the attack the following day. The few territorial gains that had been made were abandoned, because they offered no cover against the Germans' weapons. Down in Cassino, the New Zealanders' attack had also failed in similar fashion, and the offensive was halted to avoid sacrificing any more soldiers.

## Germans refused to give in

The New Zealanders made a fresh attempt a month later, on 15th March. Again, heavy bombers were deployed to soften the target. The old houses in the

city of Cassino were reduced to rubble, and the German paratroopers suffered heavy losses, too. However, the ruins also blocked the Allied tanks' passage, so the infantry had to fight alone.

House by house, the New Zealanders fought their way into the city, while the Indians slowly advanced up the slopes of Monte Cassino. But even though the division's cool-headed Nepalese got so

close to the monastery that they could almost touch the walls, it was impossible to get inside. The German paratroopers' doggedness halted the Allies in Cassino and on the mountain.

On 20th March, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent an enquiring telegram to Alexander:

"I wish you would explain to me why this passage by Cassino, monastery, ►

## NEW ZEALANDERS WERE RELIABLE

The small country only had enough troops to supply one division of around 17,000 men. In return, it gained a reputation for being among the best in the British Empire. Allied generals preferred the New Zealanders to the Australians, who were known for the ferocity of their attacks but had a reputation for poor discipline.



Monte Cassino was a tough nut to crack – even for the formidable New Zealanders.

POULOTO/TOPIOTO



hill, etc, all on a front of two or three miles, is the only place which you must keep butting at. About five or six divisions have been worn out going into these jaws."

In his reply, Alexander explained the strategic importance of Monte Cassino, but also admitted that the Allies had been caught unawares: "The tenacity of these German paratroops is quite remarkable, considering that they were subjected to the whole of the Mediterranean Air Force plus the better

part of 800 guns under the greatest concentration of firepower which has ever been put down and lasting six hours. I doubt if there are any other troops in the world who could have stood up to it and then gone on fighting with the ferocity they have."

The general, however, heeded Churchill's advice, and the offensive was called off. Instead, Alexander began to plan a push across a broader front in May. Meanwhile, the Allied troops dug themselves into their new positions,

and some sort of everyday routine was established – marked by the endless thunder of artillery and a never-ending series of small battles.

## Welcome to hell

For the soldiers on both sides of the front, spring 1944 brought only endless suffering and loss.

"What we are going through here is beyond description. I have never experienced anything like this in Russia, not even a second's peace, only the dreadful thunder of guns and mortars... Here we have nothing but terror and horror, death and damnation," wrote a German private.

The short distance between the sides meant that the only safe places were foxholes or basements beneath the ruins. As soon as any soldier left his hiding place, his life was in danger. "On the way to Company HQ, a distance of less than 200 metres, there are at least 20 German dead – how it happened is all too evident," a German soldier in Cassino reported. "[The Tommies'] snipers shoot only too well. Again and again head wounds. The mortars fire and the whistle and explosion of shells goes on, day and night. Sometimes, for a moment or two only, there is peace, and then I think of home."

The Allies also suffered constant losses from shells and mines. In the months running up to the action at the Gustav Line, German engineering troops had had plenty of time to lay explosives, and the minefields were a constant danger. The terrain also made everyday life difficult: "It took a laden man 4.5 hours to climb to the Battalion area. All water, ammunition and rations had to be carried by hand, as the route was impassable to mules," a British regiment's war diary recorded.

Fatigue was spreading among the soldiers, but the Allies had an advantage – General Alexander was able to replace his exhausted troops. Ahead of the fourth offensive in May, front-line troops at Monte Cassino were relieved by fully-rested Poles and Britons. Forces were also moved from the east coast, so Alexander had 25 divisions and 11 brigades available in the west.

Kesselring didn't have the same resources, because the German army in Italy was close to breaking point. The field marshal could only muster nine

## Tug of war over a corpse

**The battle for Monte Cassino lasted for four months and was fought man-to-man. Many soldiers viewed the battlefield as its own mini universe.**

There were few places during World War II where the opposing sides fought so closely than at the Gustav Line in the spring of 1944. In many places, the two forces were often little more than ten metres apart.

"The Germans are so close that they can reach over and crack my men on the knuckles with a broom," reported one US company commander.

In the city of Cassino, a New Zealand division lived next-door to the Germans for three days. Soldiers could hear each other through the 18-cm thick wall. This living arrangement ended abruptly, however, when a German

explosive device blew a hole in the top of the wall, and the Allies responded with a barrage of hand grenades.

At one section of the front in the mountains, British soldiers on the mountain tried to haul a German corpse in from no-man's land with a hook on a stick to search his pockets for important documents, while the Germans used signal wire to try to drag the corpse back to their own shelter.

Soldiers had to remain alert to survive. This was made very clear in the order of operations for a colonial regiment in the French army: "Silence is vital. Noise will cost lives. No coughs. Tools and equipment padded. No light. No smoking."

**Allied and German forces fought in Cassino's houses for almost six months.**

SCALA/BPK





## Monastery's treasures were saved

As part of a planned attack on 15th February 1944, Allied planes bombed the monastery on Monte Cassino to rubble, despite its rich architecture dating from the 5th Century AD. Luckily, the abbot had already spirited away its many cultural treasures. In October 1943, an art-loving German officer warned him the monastery would be at the heart of an upcoming defensive line. 70,000 books, archives and numerous precious paintings were brought to safety in Rome as a result.

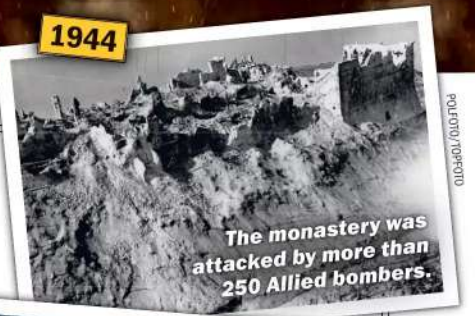
A US diplomat assured the Vatican that the monastery would be rebuilt. A cardinal replied dryly: "Even if you

rebuild it in gold and diamonds, it still isn't the monastery."

That said, the monastery's motto was *Succisa Virescit* ("having been cut down, it flourishes."). These words were prophetic, as after the war rebuilding work began. In 1964, Pope Paul VI was able to rededicate the sacred basilica, which towers over the surrounding land.

**The reconstructed building is visited every year by Catholics and tourists.**

1944



**The monastery was attacked by more than 250 Allied bombers.**

TODAY



divisions, so the paratroopers had to remain at their post at Monte Cassino.

"Not a single man of my original squad is left," wrote a German soldier home to his father. "It seems to be the same in the entire company."

The odds were slowly turning in favour of the Allies ahead of Alexander's next attempt to punch a hole in the Gustav Line.

### The Gustav Line finally fell

Code-named Operation Diadem, the fourth battle for Monte Cassino began on 12th May. Just before dawn, two Polish divisions set off towards the monastery. They were well rested and far outnumbered the German defenders.

As with the previous attacks, the paratroopers responded with machine-gun salvos. The German positions at the top of the mountain were strong, and wounded soldiers were soon streaming to the hospitals behind the front. "Some crawled to us on their own, others were helped by friends, others were slung over shoulders like sacks," recalled a field doctor called Majewski.

Despite the fierce attacks, the offensive stalled. Like other Allied forces before them, the Poles realised that the Germans' position on Monte Cassino was too strong. The attack was interrupted, in the hope that an opportunity would arise. It did, five days later. Again, it was the soldiers from France's North African colonies who paved the way for the Allies. On the westernmost part of the front, the men broke through the German defences so

that British divisions were able to advance into the Liri Valley, and the entire Gustav Line wavered. The Poles took advantage and went on the offensive once more. Again, the German paratroopers' defences were strong, but from their positions at the top of Monte Cassino, the soldiers could see the British forces making their way through the Liri Valley. The prospect of being surrounded caused the defences to crumble. Finally, Polish soldiers were able to storm the monastery and Monte Cassino fell.

On 17th May, Kesselring finally abandoned the Gustav Line, fearing that all his divisions would be surrounded. While the British were invading the Liri Valley, Allied forces finally broke out of the bridgehead at Anzio after four, exhausting months. The Allies still had a chance to capture Kesselring's forces, but instead the divisions from Anzio set course for Rome to gain the honour of being the first Allies in the Eternal City. Kesselring's divisions escaped and

established a new line of defence further north.

The battle for Monte Cassino cost more than 75,000 dead and wounded soldiers, and the survivors were forever scarred psychologically. In an Allied prisoner of war camp, German Sergeant Richard Kruppa forbade his men to mention the battle: "Speak about women, but not about Cassino!"

For the North African regiments, who'd proved more effective than any other Allied troops in Italy's mountains, a new conflict loomed. Ahead lay a struggle for independence from France, and many of the soldiers from Monte Cassino would go on to fight alongside the rebels. After Algeria gained its independence in 1962, former sergeant Ben Bella was elected as the country's new president. ■

### FURTHER READING

● John Ellis: *Cassino: The Hollow Victory*, Aurum Press, 1984  
● Matthew Parker: *Monte Cassino: The story of the hardest-fought battle of World War Two*, Headline, 2003 ● Ken Ford: *Cassino 1944*, Osprey Publishing, 2004

### POLES TOOK THE MONASTERY

When an Allied flag finally rose above the monastery, it bore the colours of Poland. During Hitler's and Stalin's partition of the country in 1939, many Poles had been captured by the Red Army. After the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, 55,000 were permitted to travel through Iran to join British forces.

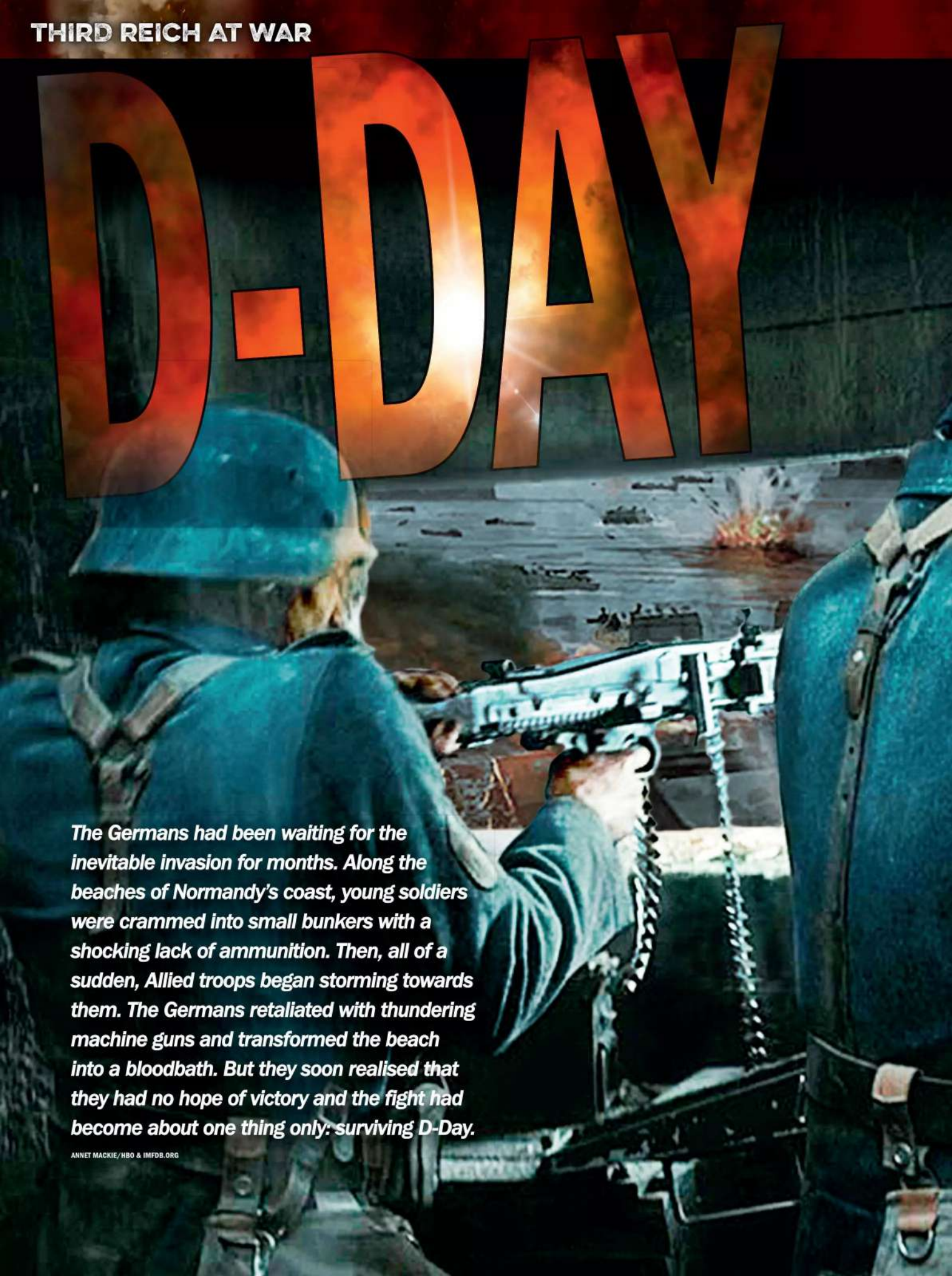


**Poles who fought with the Allies weren't welcome in communist Poland after 1945.**



THIRD REICH AT WAR

# D-DAY

A German soldier in a bunker aiming a machine gun at the beach during D-Day. The soldier is wearing a helmet and a dark uniform, and is holding a machine gun. The beach is visible in the background, with smoke and fire rising from the water. The title 'D-DAY' is written in large, stylized letters at the top of the image.

*The Germans had been waiting for the inevitable invasion for months. Along the beaches of Normandy's coast, young soldiers were crammed into small bunkers with a shocking lack of ammunition. Then, all of a sudden, Allied troops began storming towards them. The Germans retaliated with thundering machine guns and transformed the beach into a bloodbath. But they soon realised that they had no hope of victory and the fight had become about one thing only: surviving D-Day.*

ANNET MACKIE/HBO & IMFDB.ORG



# THROUGH NAZI EYES



## NORMANDY/1944

Germany has run into problems on the Eastern Front and has to deploy extra forces. Meanwhile, the Allies are preparing to attack in the west to put pressure on the enemy on two fronts. Hitler knows the attack is coming, but doesn't know where or when.





BY TROELS USSING

**H**einrich Severloh was paralysed by the sight. For months, the German had sat and kept a close watch across the English Channel from his post on Normandy's windswept dunes. Now – at around 05.30 on 6th June 1944 – he saw what he'd been dreading: small, black dots appearing on the horizon. The 20-year-old corporal and his comrades in *Widerstandsnest 62* (Resistance Nest 62) could see that the long-awaited Allied invasion was minutes from starting, but the shock was that it would happen here, where they were stationed. WN62 was one of just 14 such bunkers on Omaha Beach.

At the time, the *gefreiter* (corporal) was mesmerised by the oncoming fleet, which he described as "The most powerful armada of all time – an endless line of gigantic battleships," until a distant humming broke his trance.

"The noise grew ever louder, and as the huge bomber fleet flew straight for us in a ghostly fashion through an overcast, grey sky, the sound of the engines grew to a hellish thunder."

The first bomb landed just 50 metres behind the corporal's position, throwing earth and chalk into the air as he and his fellow Germans threw themselves to the ground or dived into their bunkers.

Not far from Severloh, Franz Gockel was in a trench. The 18-year-old private



BARNH 1011-291-1213-34

**The Allies had to cross 500 metres of open beach. As they did, the Germans subjected them to heavy fire. The MG42 machine guns used fired 1,200 rounds per minute.**

cowered in horror over his Polish machine gun. "Debris and clouds of smoke enveloped us," he later recalled. "The earth shook. Eyes and ears filled with dust. Sand ground between teeth."

The German blinked to see the ships were now close enough to shore to fire their deadly guns, which glowed orange and red around their barrels. Gockel felt a "wall of fire" as the salvo struck the German positions on land. To calm his nerves, the 18-year-old machine gunner began to pray, trying not to think about

the overwhelming force coming towards him. But even as he prayed, he could hear his own voice inside his head: "I won't survive this, I won't survive this."

## Zone of death to stop invasion

By the end of 1943, Hitler and his generals were in no doubt that the Allies would attempt a landing on the continent the following year. The question was where?

The German Atlantic Wall stretched along most of Europe's west coast. However, the defensive fortifications that – according to Nazi propaganda – had been built with "fanatical zeal" and were "impregnable" failed to live up to their billing. Erwin Rommel, who was given responsibility for overseeing the western coastal defences in November 1943, kicked the sand in frustration when he visited the positions along the coast. Yes, there were thousands of bunkers as well as coastal batteries and machine-gun positions, but there were many gaps along the line, too. The field marshal had set his men in motion.

Soldiers such as Severloh and Gockel rolled up their sleeves alongside prisoners to dig holes in the sand and fill them with poles, on top of which mines would be placed. At the same time, barriers were shipped to the coast from occupied territories in Czechoslovakia and Belgium. Millions more mines were buried in the sand, while trenches were built at least 500 metres from the water's edge, stretching inland into what Rommel dubbed a "zone of death".

"I believe we shall win the defensive battle in the west if we still have time to

## Germans quarrelled over strategy

Field marshals Erwin Rommel and Gerd von Rundstedt disagreed on how Germany should stop the coming invasion. Rommel was in charge of the Atlantic Wall, while von Rundstedt was in charge of the defence in the west.

Rommel wanted the German tanks to support the guns just behind the beaches, while von Rundstedt wanted to keep the tanks further inland, so they could gather and launch a major attack on the Allies once they had landed.

**Von Rundstedt**

**His philosophy:**  
The enemy must be defeated inland.

**The two officers never agreed on strategy, which is why Hitler took control of the panzer divisions in 1944.**

**Rommel**

**His philosophy:**  
The enemy must be stopped on the beaches.

GETTY IMAGES



prepare," wrote an optimistic Rommel to his wife in spring 1944. "I believe we can repulse the onslaught."

The field marshal's main problem was that the clock was ticking, and fast. Everyone in German High Command believed the Allies would invade in early June. Roosevelt and Churchill enjoyed two key advantages over the defenders: massive numerical superiority and better-trained soldiers. A large proportion of the German defensive forces in the west comprised inexperienced privates or prisoners of war who'd escaped captivity by enlisting in the German Army.

Yet the Germans' biggest issue lay with the navy and the deplorable condition of the Luftwaffe on the Western Front, meaning they lacked warships, submarines and aircraft. Hitler and Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels chose, as usual, to ignore the gloomy prospects.

"We are ready! If the enemy comes, our soldiers will teach him a lesson,"

**"The most powerful armada of all time – an endless line of gigantic battleships"**

Heinrich Severloh,  
German corporal, 1944

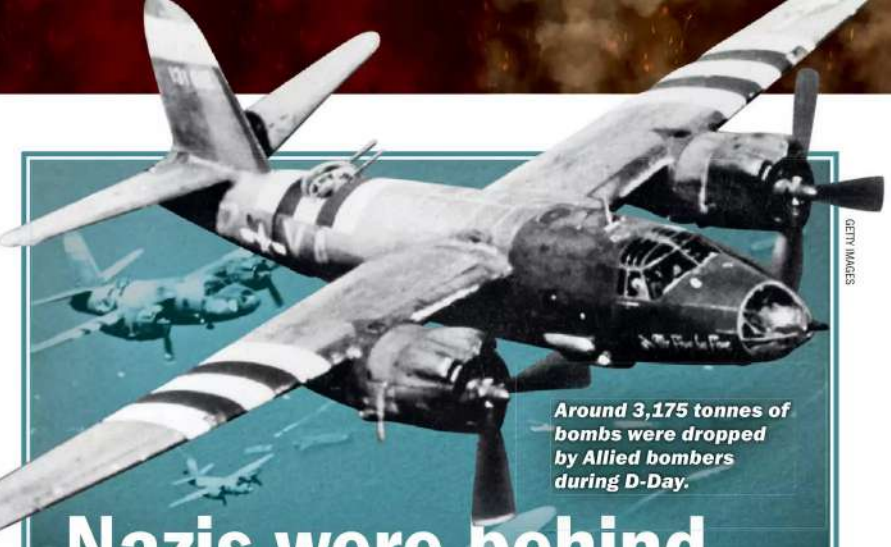
thundered Goebbels just days before the invasion. The Führer also oozed confidence when he sent a message to the troops in France: "I know, my heroic soldiers, that each one of you is filled with the will to fight for a fortunate future for our people in the next few days – and ultimately to secure it. Wherever the enemy attacks, he must be destroyed. He will not succeed in gaining a foothold on a coast defended by us. Victory will therefore be ours!"

The two senior Nazis would be proven badly wrong.

### Bombs began falling

Hitler's and Goebbels's words were far from the minds of Severloh, Gockel and their comrades on Omaha Beach, where more than 10,000 rockets and shells rained down on them in just 30 minutes.

Gefreiter Gustav Winter was sitting in a bunker one kilometre from Severloh's and Gockel's positions and felt the Allied bombing, too. Together with his 17-year-old Czech gun loader, Winter was responsible for halting any enemy troops from their 'concrete panzer' at WN 68, which was situated on one of the lowest cliffs at Omaha. But they, and their 50-millimetre gun, were almost



Around 3,175 tonnes of bombs were dropped by Allied bombers during D-Day.

## Nazis were behind from the first shot

In almost every way, the Germans were weaker on D-Day. The Allies' air superiority, in particular, made the defence of the coast hopeless.

An incredible invasion force of 156,000 troops arrived at the Normandy coast in the early morning of 6th June 1944.

The Allies were able to land three times as many soldiers as the German defensive forces. The Nazis did have the upper hand in that their enemy had to fight its way ashore on a coast defended by thousands of field guns and artillery, but when faced with 6,939 ships – including large warships with just as powerful guns as those of the Germans – it was scant consolation to the defenders.

The Germans' limited supply of shells and machine-gun ammo made the situation almost hopeless; they didn't stand a chance of stopping the enemy, who had almost 450,000 tonnes of ammunition. There was certainly no need for the Allies to worry about running out of shells or bullets during the invasion.

The Nazis' biggest disadvantage, however, was without doubt the Allies'

air superiority. The attackers carpet-bombed the coast and hinterland, without fear of encountering aerial resistance because the Luftwaffe had almost no aircraft on the Western Front at the time of the invasion.

D-DAY IN NUMBERS		
SOLDIERS	50,350	156,000
AIRCRAFT	327	11,590
WARSHIPS	105	1,213
ARTILLERY	3,200	4,800
TANKS	1,400	Unknown
LOSSES (dead & wounded)	4-9,000	8,843 (incl. 4,000 paratroopers)

completely enclosed by concrete, and had no idea what was going on. They had no view of the sky and could only just glimpse the sea. However, they could feel the tremors and the dust.

"When one of the naval shells exploded near us, the shock wave came through the ground and travelled through the panzer, which felt like a punch in the stomach. These blows came again and again, every time a kick in the belly, and making my ears

ring horribly," Winter recalled. Meanwhile, the Czech loader was lying on the floor, sobbing.

At 06.15, the men in WN 62 could see through the smoke that hundreds of landing craft were cutting their way through the 1.5-metre-high waves ▶



close to shore. Severloh sprinted to the neighbouring communications bunker.

"Now it's starting! They're landing!" he shouted loudly, before zigzagging back to his own bunker, where one of his fellow soldiers awaited.

Severloh made sure his heavy MG42 machine gun was firmly fixed to its

supports, while his comrade fed the weapon a belt of 7.92-mm Mauser bullets. But both soldiers knew that they didn't have anything like enough ammo.

## Lambs to the slaughter

His heart pounding, Severloh watched as the enemy's landing craft vessels (LCVs)

approached the shore like ants crawling up and down the waves. The corporal and his countrymen were surprised that the Allies were attacking at low tide. It meant the landing craft avoided colliding with the German mined poles and iron barriers, but as a consequence, the US forces would have to navigate a

# Massive concrete bunkers held Atlantic Wall together

Along Europe's west coast, the Germans had built *Widerstandsnesten* (resistance nests). These were large bunkers with powerful guns, surrounded by smaller bunkers and trenches.



The battery at Longues-sur-Mer, near Omaha Beach, housed four 152-mm guns, which shelled enemy ships during the invasion.

It took a total of seven men to operate one of the Germans' large 152-mm guns.

One or two men were engaged in supplying the bunker's various units with shells or machine-gun ammunition.

## SLEEPING QUARTERS

were inside the bunker, so that the large guns could always be manned quickly if the enemy suddenly appeared. In all, up to 200 men could be attached to each *Widerstandsnest*, including people to run the associated smaller bunkers and trenches.

**THE GUNS** varied in size, depending on the size of the bunker. The largest at the beaches of Normandy had a calibre of 152 mm.

**CONCRETE WALLS** were one to three metres thick.

**AMMO DEPOTS** were filled with shells and rifle ammunition.



deadly 300-metre-long route across the open beach until they could find cover beneath a dyke.

At 06.30, the first bow ramps in the Higgins boats were lowered, and the soldiers jumped out, surprisingly calm. In some places, the water was still so deep that the GIs sank under the water, after which they were forced to half-swim, half-wade into formed columns, as if they were undertaking an exercise. The Germans along the coast were yet to open fire. They had been ordered not to shoot until the marines were around 400 metres away, in water up to their knees.

"The Americans struggled forward with their weapons and packs through the high surf of the cold sea, slowly and utterly unprotected. We were well aware that the GIs below us were being led like lambs to a slaughter," Severloh said later.

The corporal had a perfect view of the beach from his small bunker 25 metres up on the clifftop. Severloh's finger itched, impatient to squeeze the MG42's cold metal trigger. The gun, with a firing rate of 1,200 rounds per minute, had been nicknamed *Hitlersäge* ('Hitler's buzzsaw').

"Poor swine," muttered Severloh's superior, Oberleutnant Bernhard Frerking, as the enemy approached the 400-metre mark.

Shortly afterwards, the call to arms rang across all the bunkers and machine-gun positions along the shore at Omaha Beach: "*Las!* (Open fire!)" It was time to slaughter the enemy.

### Beach was bathed in blood

Suddenly, the heavy machine guns, mortars and field guns unleashed an inferno on the beach, where the defenceless US troops were ripped to pieces. Severed arms and legs flew into the air as a result of the Germans' powerful weapons, and landing craft splintered into pieces of metal and wood that flew through the air like arrows. Severloh also swung his machine gun from side to side: "I could clearly see the water shoot up where my machine-gun bullets hit," he wrote. "When the small fountains approached the GIs, they threw themselves down. After just a few minutes, panic broke out."

The corporal watched as US troops desperately crawled towards the

beach's defences of wide iron barricades and angled iron beams – known as 'Belgian gates' and 'Czech hedgehogs' respectively – to find some cover. At the same time, new boats continued to deliver streams of new soldiers – 30 from each LCV – to the beach.

"As the boats approached, I concentrated on the ramps. As soon as they came down for the GIs to jump out, I began to fire. ... I sometimes used my carbine, since I could fire aimed shots at individual soldiers and ... give my machine gun a chance to cool down," Severloh recounted.

Later, the man dubbed the 'Beast of Omaha' admitted: "I do not know how many men I shot. It was awful. Thinking about it makes me want to throw up. I almost emptied an entire infantry landing craft. The sea was red around it."

Not far from Seveloh's bunker, Franz Gockel also sat with his finger glued to the trigger of his Polish machine gun. The 18-year-old had recovered from the shock of the initial bombardment to now take on the role of executioner. On the rare occasions when he stopped firing in order to allow the gun to cool down, Gockel was able to form an overview of

**"So many bodies lay on the beach. And new men just kept coming. We couldn't understand it."**

Franz Gockel,  
German soldier, 1944



**Double agent Juan Pujol fed the unsuspecting Germans false information about the invasion, for which they gave him with the Iron Cross.**

the unfolding massacre. "So many bodies lay on the beach. And new men just kept coming. We couldn't understand it."

The constant flow of new troops was down to the fact that the Allies had enormous resources. In addition to soldiers, amphibious tanks and armoured bulldozers rolled on to the beach during the early part of the invasion, sending up cascades of water and sand while US troops took cover behind them.

As the clock passed 10.30, thousands of marines had reached cover behind the beach's seawall. Severloh and Gockel watched as enemy troops – supported ▶

## Germans deceived by cardboard and plastic

In the spring of 1944, German air reconnaissance took photos that revealed a large invasion force being prepared in south-east England, opposite Calais in France.

A sea of landing craft bobbed on the water, while tanks and planes stood in lines near the coast, but it was all

a scam. The tanks and boats were actually made from cardboard, rubber and plastic.

The British double agent Juan Pujol managed to convince the Germans that the invasion force was real, so the majority of the German forces were at Calais on D-Day.

**The resolution of German aerial photos wasn't good enough to reveal the hoax.**



GETTY IMAGES



by destroyers and Sherman tanks – stormed the German minefield and approached the bottom of the cliffs. At the same time, both Germans could see their ammunition stores were dwindling. Fear now struck in earnest.

## Paralysed by the horrors

Gefreiter Winter and his Czech aide saw their first serious action when they heard the engine of a Sherman tank trying to battle its way forward. Through his gun's target, Winter spied his countrymen fleeing from one of the dunes. As he followed their progress, they were caught in a blast from a shell, blown into fragments of flesh and bone.

"I dreaded the thought of dying like that," Winter recalled. Seconds later, a cloud of sand cleared to reveal a US tank crawling its way up the dune.

"This was a great shock to me, as I didn't think it was possible for the attackers to come off the beach, but I fired on that panzer immediately. It was a Sherman class panzer, which was very high in profile, and made an easy target – especially with the big, white star they had painted on the front," he said. To his amazement, his shell bounced off the tank's armour, exploding behind it.

The US tank responded with a machine-gun salvo, which dislodged his gunsight before it fired a shell that destroyed Winter's turret and hit the Czech loader full in the chest. The impact killed Winter's assistant but slowed the shell enough to prevent it bouncing back off the wall to hit Winter.

"So this poor boy, who barely needed to shave his chin, saved my life in that way. He died instantly, standing next to me. That was the end of the concrete panzer as far as I was concerned."

The former panzer corporal knew it was time to leave as he spied several tanks and marines pouring over the sand dunes. One US soldier was carrying a flamethrower, which he directed at a German anti-tank position around 100 metres from Winter's own bunker. With great ferocity, a burst of fire engulfed the gun and those manning it.

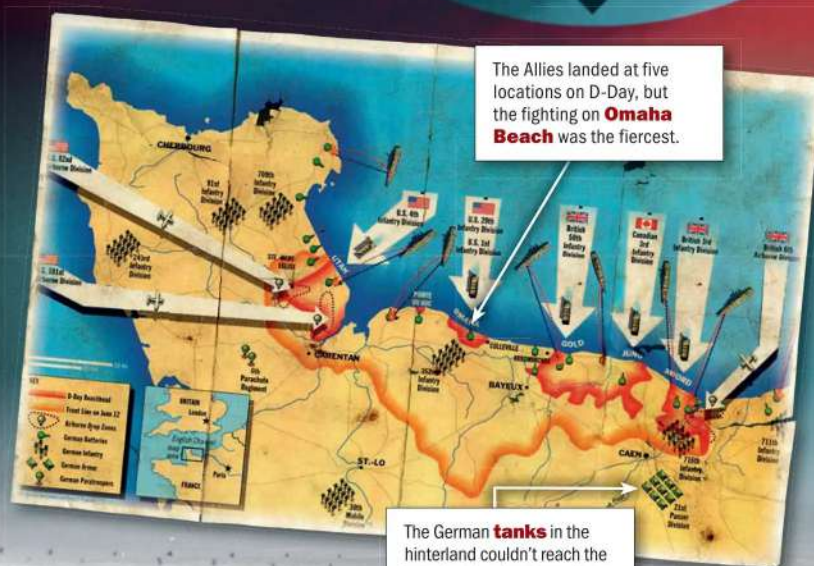
Winter witnessed this after sneaking out of his turret's side hatch to drop down behind the concrete structure. To his horror, he saw the dunes he knew so well filled with huge craters and body parts, as smoke and dust swirled around.

"It was absolute hell on that sand. Absolute hell," he recalled.

Gefreiter Winter cowered behind the turret. He sat and watched as GIs ran ▶

# Atlantic Wall was strongest at high tide

On the Normandy coast, there is a difference of up to 300 metres in the width of the beach between high and low tides. The Germans had laid their defences at Omaha Beach under the assumption that the Allies would attack at high tide, when they would only have to cross about 200 metres of exposed sandy beach. But the Allies arrived at low tide, thus neutralising several of the German traps.



The German tanks in the hinterland couldn't reach the beaches due to enemy planes and paratroopers.

Many of the German soldiers at Omaha Beach were veterans of the Eastern Front.





## The model invasion

The German defences at Omaha Beach had been set up for an attack at high tide, as shown:

### Belgian gates to stop Allied vessels

The 1,280-kg metal barricades – which the Nazis stole during the invasion of Belgium – were three metres wide and two metres high. They were designed to stop enemy boats as they sailed into them.

### Mines to blow the Allies to pieces

Wooden poles, called 'Rommel's asparagus', as well as obstruction beams with mines attached, were positioned so they would blow holes in the bottom of incoming landing craft and sink them.

### Hedgehogs blocked path

The 1.5-metre-high angled iron beams known as 'Czech hedgehogs' were one of the few defences that also worked at low tide. They could stop both landing craft and tanks.

### Difficult landing

A dyke marked the high water mark. It consisted of a stone wall and a long row of barbed wire, which the enemy had to break through using explosives known as Bangalore torpedoes.

### Sand hid dangers

The last 200 metres of the beach were filled with buried mines, barbed-wire fences and a 50-metre-high cliff, which the enemy had to climb – while being shot at by German machine gunners.

### Bunkers covered all routes inland

Fourteen large bunker facilities with guns, mortars and machine guns lay along Omaha Beach. They were strategically located so they covered every road from the beach.

Belgian gates

Obstruction beams

Mined poles

Czech hedgehogs

Barbed wire fence

Machine-gun pit

Obstacles in the water

Obstacles on land

Had the Allies attacked at high tide, their landing craft would have slid up the obstruction beams and hit the mines.



past his position. Only the thirteenth to pass spotted the German, instinctively striking Winter's face with his rifle butt: "He had a bayonet fixed on it, and he was going to stab me with it, I think," explained Winter, "but an explosion close by diverted his attention."

While the enemy continued to flood past, Winter noted many were still in wet clothes as they worked to secure a path away from the beachhead. Suddenly, another US soldier grabbed Winter, pointed towards the beach, and

kicked the German in the backside to send him on his way down the cliff.

The corporal was met at the foot of the hill by more invasion troops, who handcuffed him and placed him with other German prisoners. He took in the view of the beach, from the shoreline, where dead US troops had washed ashore, to the bottom of the cliffs, where the charred remains of German corpses had fallen from their defence posts. Winter would never forget it: "It was a sight that would make the bravest man

very mournful. ... We German prisoners were all mute, just looking at this."

## Germans soldiers fled

By 13.00, the Allies had landed over 19,000 US troops – and bulldozers hummed around clearing obstacles to allow tanks to advance. As the enemy invaded the easternmost part of Omaha, where Winter had been located, Gockel still sat in his bunker a kilometre away.

The 18-year-old's machine gun had been destroyed by a shell, so he was

# Straying paratroopers wreaked havoc in the hinterland

Shortly after midnight on D-Day, more than 13,000 US soldiers began descending from the sky behind the coast. The air strike caused confusion among the German rear troops, who believed the enemy was everywhere.

German soldier Wolfgang Geritzlehner found himself behind the beaches of Normandy when 820 Skytrain aircraft broke the night silence on 6th June.

"The sky was full of planes. At one stroke there were soldiers coming out of all corners. It was like a swarm of maddened bees. We weren't afraid. We

were convinced that everything would be settled in a few hours," he later wrote.

But the Germans were ashamed to admit that their strong air defences hit no more than 21 of the US troop planes. However, due to thick cloud cover, many of the enemy's 13,100 soldiers were dropped outside the planned drop zones and then dispersed by the wind. Ultimately, however, this created even greater problems for the German regiments, which were constantly receiving reports of new enemy units.

The multitude of small groups of US troops improvised and took advantage of the Germans' confusion to reach their designated goals, where they blocked bridges and cut off the roads to the coast, where the invasion began at dawn.

The Germans managed to take nearly 2,500 paratroopers out of the game, but in the afternoon they had to admit that the enemy's airborne mission had been a success. Several German panzer units were unable to go to the rescue of their compatriots on the coast in time because bridges and roads were destroyed.

Slowly descending paratroopers were easy targets for the Germans on the ground.

The Allied C-47 Skytrain aircraft each carried 16 to 18 men.



now firing with his Karabiner 98k rifle. Attempting to return to his position after scavenging food from his troop bunker, he was shot through his left hand – looking down at it, he saw “three fingers hanging loose by torn tendons”.

“That’s a ticket home for you,” the soldier who administered first aid on the hand said enviously of the so-called *Heimatschuss* (home shot).

His wound bandaged, the young soldier was given permission to leave the front. He avoided the area’s major roads, afraid US troops would follow the same route, and instead snuck along small paths until he found an ambulance carrying other wounded men.

As the vehicle rumbled along the road towards an aid station in Balleroy, 15 kilometres from the coast, Gockel peered out from the tarpaulin hole in the rear and saw how the landscape had been bombed by Allied planes: “Dead cattle lay in the pastures [and] the supply units had also suffered their share of casualties.”

Several times, the ambulance was forced to stop because burnt-out German trucks blocked the way, while dead and dying compatriots lay in the ditches on the side of the road. Gockel was shocked at the destruction, but the 18-year-old found solace in the thought that he would soon be returning to Germany.

The fatherland felt much further away to Heinrich Severloh, who by 14.30 had exhausted all his ammunition. Instead, he was now feeding the MG42 with tracer bullets. They were as effective as ordinary bullets, but lit up the German’s position every time he squeezed the trigger.

In the space of just ten minutes, Severloh had been flung from his weapon four times by powerful shells that exploded near the bunker, filling the German soldier’s lungs with smoke. The explosions left his ears ringing. Disorientated and barely able to hear what was going on around him, Severloh and his fellow comrades in the bunker knew that this was their last chance to get away.

The German ran bent double from the brief shelter of one shell crater to the next. For several minutes, Severloh waited behind a hideout for his fellow soldiers from the bunker, but only one showed up, breathless – the others had been gunned down by enemy

bullets, including Severloh’s close friend Lieutenant Bernhard Frerking.

Although every muscle in his body ached, and blood ran from a wound in his face, Severloh and his comrade knew they had to flee. Several times on their five-kilometre flight to battalion HQ in the village of Colleville, they were forced to change course to avoid running into advanced US units. Exhausted, they tumbled into the headquarters, where a nurse treated Severloh’s facial wounds.

Amid all the discouraging news, the corporal had one sliver of hope to cling to as he overheard a conversation between two officers.

“We’re waiting for the tanks,” said one. “Then we’ll kick those Americans out again.”

**“We’re waiting for the tanks. Then we’ll kick those Americans out again”**

German officer, 1944

#### Allied troops advanced

No one at headquarters was aware of how critical the situation was, and the panzer units they were relying on to repel the offensive were faring just as badly. In many places, Allied paratroopers had gained control of bridges and roads into the countryside, while enemy aircraft and the naval armada destroyed those tanks able to approach the coast.

It was with good reason that the Germans lost heart during “the longest day”, as Erwin Rommel described 6th June 1944. The Allies established bridgeheads along all five landing beaches, and in some cases these extended up to eight kilometres inland. In the evening, a German chief-of-staff responded to Rommel’s demand for a situation report by estimating that the

enemy was landing one tank per minute. Deep down, Rommel and his generals knew the enemy had secured a firm hold on the French coast.

Colleville would also be taken before the end of 6th June. Along with several countrymen, Severloh managed to sneak out of the village before the Sherman tanks rolled in. In the dark, they stumbled south in the hopes of meeting friendly forces, but after just a few kilometres found themselves pinned down by fire from heavy machine guns, forcing the group to seek a hiding place in the low-lying terrain.

“We had to concede that the war had already moved behind us and now we were a small, lost group, with few weapons and few prospects, surrounded by enemies and were lying in a damp hollow somewhere at the end of the world,” Severloh wrote later.

As the night wore on, Severloh sank into despair: “Was the whole struggle, the personal sacrifice, the enormous use of physical and mental strength, the fear, the pain and the terrible killing all for nothing? I thought too of Frerking and felt tears well up in my eyes and run warmly down my swollen face. Now it was all over.”

As light dawned the next day, Severloh and his comrades stood up. Unarmed, hands in the air, they stepped through the undergrowth and into a nearby field, where US troops stood waiting for them. Exactly 24 hours after the invasion had begun, the war was over for Severloh. ■

#### FURTHER READING

• Richard Hargreaves: *The Germans in Normandy*, Diorama, 2008 • Holger Eckhertz: *D Day Through German Eyes*, DTZ History Publications, 2015




**The Allies built large temporary ports to land troops and materiel after D-Day.**  
GETTY IMAGES



THIRD REICH AT WAR

# HIMMLER'S WEREWOLVES FOUGHT TO THE LAST

A black and white photograph showing a line of young men in military uniforms, likely Hitler Youth recruits, standing in profile. They are wearing dark uniforms with belts and caps. The image is framed with a torn paper effect at the top and bottom.

*Boys aged 16 to 18 from  
Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth) made  
up the majority of the recruits  
for Himmler's Werewolf Corps.*

GETTY IMAGES



The Werewolves emblem was inspired by the hunting hook used in medieval wolf traps.

*From October 1944, Allied troops captured one German city after another. In response, Himmler unleashed his new Werewolf corps. Its task was to covertly attack the enemy and kill any German who betrayed Nazism.*

BY ELSE CHRISTENSEN

It was 25th March 1945 and two figures lurked in the dark in front of Franz Oppenhoff's house. They were waiting for the chance to assassinate the city's mayor. Soon the cellar door swung open, and the mayor approached the two shadowy figures. When he was alongside them, one of the assassins raised his Walther pistol and aimed it at the mayor, but nothing happened. The assassin's hand was shaking and sweat beaded his upper lip; his finger was frozen on the trigger.

"Do it," his partner hissed furiously, but the assassin was unable to move.

"You cowardly sow!", his partner spat, tearing the pistol from the paralysed hitman's hand. Determined, he stepped forward, pointed the gun at Oppenhoff's temple, shouted "Heil Hitler" and pulled the trigger.

#### Hitler sent the hitmen

Oppenhoff had been at the top of the Nazis' hit list since the year before, when Aachen became the first German city to fall into enemy hands when US troops arrived on 21st October 1944.

After fierce fighting, the city was left a smouldering heap of ruins and thousands of citizens were suddenly homeless. Reluctantly, lawyer Franz Oppenhoff agreed to lead the work of getting them rehoused before the winter set in. He was installed as mayor with little ceremony, for no one doubted the risks involved with being seen to be cooperating with the Allies. The Nazis had made it clear that in the occupied parts of Germany, there should be no German civilian administration and no German judiciary. Anyone

holding such offices would not survive a month, they'd said.

Although Oppenhoff had tried to avoid any publicity when he was sworn in as mayor, Hitler still heard about it a few days later. Furious, the Führer demanded that the "traitor" in Aachen be eliminated. No other German city had so much as thought of betraying the Fatherland in the same despicable way.

A few weeks earlier, SS leader Heinrich Himmler had set up a German guerrilla organisation to covertly attack and undermine the Allies as they moved into Germany. Himmler had christened the project *Unternehmen Werewolf* (Operation Werewolf) and now he offered to send his Werewolves to Aachen to assassinate the collaborator Oppenhoff. Hitler was thrilled.

#### Thousands signed up to fight

The leader of the Werewolf Corps was SS officer Hans-Adolf Prützmann, who was already recruiting volunteers for his corps. He was helped enormously in this task by Nazi propaganda that suggested all manner of misfortunes would befall ordinary German citizens if the enemy occupied their homeland.

By the end of the year, approximately 5,000 Werewolves were being trained at barracks across the country. Burly teenagers from the Nazi youth organization *Hitlerjugend* made up the majority of the Werewolves corps, while a few came from the corresponding ▶

Heinrich Himmler

## WEREWOLF HANDBOOK

### ROAD BLOCKS

"Tree blockades are made by cutting down trees over a distance of 20 to



30 metres. The trees should fall crosswise over each other."

SOURCE: Page 32 in the Werewolf handbook from 1945



ANG-IMAGES

## Corps was named after a bestseller

In 1910, the author Hermann Löns wrote the novel *Der Wehrwolf*. His werewolves were not supernatural beings, but members of a peasant army that defended their home against bandits during Europe's Thirty Years' War (1618-1648).

Himmler loved the story and named his guerrilla force after the army in the novel. The book became compulsory for German children near the end of the war.



**Der Wehrwolf became a bestseller in Nazi Germany.**

*Bund Deutscher Mädel* (League of German Girls).

Hardened SS officers were in charge of the training, which typically lasted five weeks and included everything a guerilla needed to know: how to operate German and Allied weapons, use explosives, camouflage, and survive in the field.

An extensive Werewolf handbook with instructive drawings was used during the training, in which SS officers repeatedly emphasised that a Werewolf could trust no one. From now on, their lives belonged to the Führer.

At Schloss Hülchrath, a medieval castle near Düsseldorf, a small unit of recruits received particularly intensive training. The group was to carry out the corps' first task: the assassination of the mayor of Aachen.

Prützmann carefully selected the hit squad from among 50 recruits at the castle. He appointed SS officer Herbert Wenzel, the training officer at the school, to lead the group. Wenzel was given the

task of planning the assassination and obtaining the necessary equipment. Another of the school's officers, Josef Leitgeb, became Wenzel's deputy. Leitgeb wasn't especially smart, but he was tall and muscular, and seemed fearless during training.

23-year-old Ilse Hirsch was selected to provide supplies. Hirsch, like most female Werewolves, had been a member of *Bund Deutscher Mädel* for years, which had helped to prepare her for her role. Like the last member of the group, 16-year-old Erich Morgenschweiss, she was a fanatical Nazi and ready to fight to the last for the Führer.

Two former border officers from near Aachen, Karl-Heinz Hennemann and Georg Heidorn, would serve as guides.

The plan was named Operation Carnival because the hit on Oppenhoff was originally scheduled to take place around the Catholic Mardi Gras celebration in February. However, their preparations weren't complete until 20th March, at which time the four Werewolves went into action.

### Operation Carnival had a bad start

Shortly before midnight, the four Werewolves and their two guides parachuted from a plane over the forested region west of Aachen. Once safely on the ground, they hastily buried their parachutes and distributed their supplies. With their rucksacks full, the Werewolves set off towards the site where they had chosen to camp, but things quickly went wrong: a Dutch border guard suddenly appeared between the trees and fired several shots at the group. Morgenschweiss responded quickly, killing him with a well-placed shot. For safety's sake, they decided to split up and continue on alone.

Ilse Hirsch reached the city first. She discarded the German uniform she had been wearing, and entered Aachen in the early morning in a skirt and blouse.

With a stolen basket under her arm, she resembled the other women who went out every morning to look for food and firewood. An elderly woman willingly told her the way to Oppenhoff's house: the mayor lived on Eupener Strasse on the outskirts of the city, she said. Hirsch's heart was in her mouth as

she knocked at the door, which was opened by the mayor's young housekeeper. Hirsch begged for a glass of water and was allowed to enter.

On the way down to the basement kitchen, Hirsch took note of every detail that could help the assassins.

The following day, Hirsch made contact with the rest of the group, and together they camped in the forest, a 90-minute walk away from Oppenhoff's house. The final details of the hit were worked out over the next few days.

### Mine killed the killer

On Sunday 25th March, Wenzel and Leitgeb sneaked up to Oppenhoff's house disguised as German pilots. A little after 21.00, they crawled in through the basement window, while Hennemann kept watch outside.

The two men found only the housekeeper, who told them that Oppenhoff and his wife had gone to visit a neighbour. The couple's three children were asleep upstairs. The Werewolves asked the frightened housekeeper to fetch the mayor, saying that they urgently needed a pass so they could get through the US checkpoints and get back to the German lines, 100 km to the east.

She did as they asked, returning shortly afterwards with Oppenhoff by her side. He was easily recognisable by the special armband he wore, which identified him as the mayor of Aachen. The neighbour had come with him.

Oppenhoff refused to issue a pass. He explained that the war would be over in a few days and that it would be better for the pilots to surrender to the Americans. Then he went into the house to fetch some food for his hungry countrymen. The neighbour, sensing trouble, disappeared to look for a US patrol.

When Oppenhoff came back outside with the sandwiches, Wenzel pointed his pistol at the mayor, but he couldn't shoot. Leitgeb ripped the gun from his hand and killed Oppenhoff. Thanks to the silencer, the shot was barely audible to anyone other than the perpetrators, who escaped across the fields behind

**In October 1944, Nazi Germany was under attack from the south, east and west.**

GETTY IMAGES



Oppenhoff's house before the Americans summoned by the neighbour could arrive.

The Werewolf unit met up in the forest and fled towards the German lines, but the assassin Leitgeb didn't get far: two days later he stepped on a mine and was blown to bits. Later, the group triggered another landmine, which wounded Hirsch, Morgenschweiss and Heidorn, but they managed to reach safety, along with Hennemann.

### The Werewolves left calling cards

Two weeks after the murder of Oppenhoff, Himmler's Werewolves struck again. On 9th April 1945, employees of the town hall in the small US-occupied town of Kirchlingern found Mayor Wilhelm Pieper lying dead in his office. He had been shot. At his feet lay a card with the word "traitor", written in

red. The card bore the stamp "*Die Werwölfe*" ("The Werewolves").

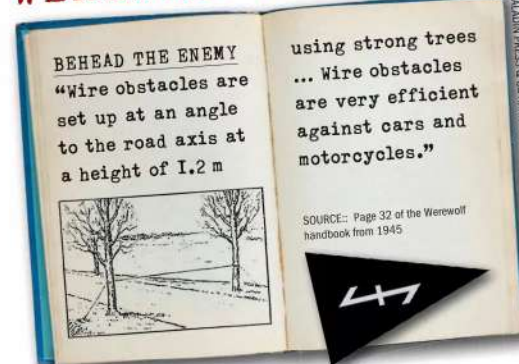
Like Oppenhoff, Pieper's only crime had been trying to help his city's citizens survive the last harsh weeks of the war.

As the Allies penetrated deeper and deeper into Germany, the Werewolf units began cracking down on ordinary Germans who dared to say that the war could no longer be won.

A farmer in Dötlingen was shot for saying that Allied troops would execute local Nazi leaders when they took Lower Saxony, for example, while in Berlin, Werewolves fatally stabbed a professor for throwing his uniform into a lake in the Charlottenburg district.

Other actions focused on the advancing enemy. Werewolf units derailed trains that were supplying the Allies, cut telephone lines, meddled with

## WEREWOLF HANDBOOK



road signs and destroyed roads. Not surprisingly, the Werewolves were most active in the east, where Soviet troops were advancing in an unstoppable wave.

The atrocities committed by the Soviet soldiers, including massacring civilians ▶

# Werewolves unleashed in war's final months

Nazi Germany was shrinking by the day when Himmler launched his Werewolf project in October 1944. By 20th March 1945, the recruits were ready for action.



### Cooperation banned

Mayor Oppenhoff cooperates with US occupation forces in the city of Aachen. The Werewolves assassinate him on 25th March 1945.

SOVIET UNION

### Destroy everything

Werewolves blow up an ammunition depot in the city of Aussig on 31st July - more than two months after Germany's capitulation. The blast kills 27 civilians.

### Murdered 'disloyal' Germans

On 29th April, around a hundred Werewolves enter the village of Penzberg, near the border with Austria. Sixteen German citizens are murdered because the town has not complied with an order to blow up its coal mine before the Americans arrive.

- ★ Well-documented Werewolf actions
- Areas under Nazi control in October 1944
- Areas under Allied control in October 1944
- Neutral countries





*"Your actions make the enemy insecure."  
"Strike at every opportunity."  
"He is vulnerable in the back."*

Quotes from  
Radio Werewolf in  
April 1945.

## Radio propaganda intimidated the Allies

While the Werewolves' were up against a superior enemy, Radio Werewolf made the Allies fear guerrilla warfare in Germany.

Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels launched Radio Werewolf on 1st April 1945. Its daily broadcasts encouraged people to continue to fight even after their city had been occupied by the Allies.

The station's first broadcast included the rallying cry: "Hatred is our prayer and revenge is our war cry. Woe to the foreigners who torture and

oppress our people, but threefold woe to the traitors among our own people who help them."

The broadcasts made the Americans and Soviets fear a popular uprising in occupied Germany – even long after Radio Werewolf went silent. On 23rd April 1945, the Russians captured the radio station in Nauen, near Berlin.

and raping German women, brought more recruits to the Werewolf corps, but the guerrillas' actions remained scattered and without appreciable effect.

One of the reasons the Werewolves only carried out small-scale operations against the Soviets was the corps' chronic lack of weapons. When Himmler was drawing up plans for a commando-style organisation to operate behind enemy lines, he envisioned countless weapons caches being dug within

Germany's forests. Then, as the army and SS divisions withdrew, the Werewolf units could dig up the equipment and strike at the enemy with destructive force. Once a mission had been carried out, they could melt back into the forest and restock for the next action. The realities, however, were quite different. By early 1945 both the army and the SS were desperately short of weapons, and neither were willing to hand over their dwindling supplies of arms to mere boys.

Few secret weapons caches were therefore available when the Werewolves assembled for action, and the contents usually proved to be disappointing: there were neither panzerfaust anti-tank weapons nor even pistols with sufficient ammunition.

### Fear of Werewolves increased

German radio and newspapers in March and April 1945 painted a completely different picture of the Werewolves. The media described them as a fearsome force that hurled itself at the enemy. The propaganda made the Allies so fearful

that they cracked down hard in on anyone suspected of being a Werewolf.

Many German civilians were worried that the Werewolves' acts of sabotage would ultimately lead to collective punishment and reprisals – few, however, were brave enough to say it out loud. In March 1945, the mayor of Olpe, near Cologne, did speak up, saying that the: "Heaviest punishment will follow up lawless actions not only for the individual himself but also for all of us".

The influential doctor Hermann Herzog from Blankenburg agreed, suggesting that: "for each [Allied officer] 'bumped off', ten innocents – perhaps more – will be stood before the wall."

However, the hunt for Werewolves only had fatal consequences a few months later.

### Revenge led to massacre

As Germany neared collapse, individual Nazis set up their own Werewolf groups, which they used for private revenge. Among them was Hans Zöberlein – a former member of Hitler's SA.

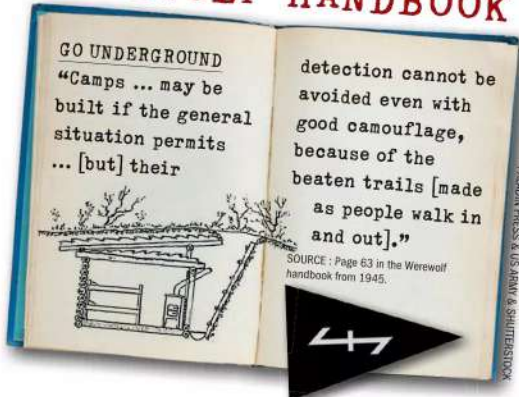
In April 1945, Zöberlein and his henchmen patrolled the towns of Upper Bavaria looking for white flags or breaches of the commander's so-called Nero command, which ordered the Germans to apply scorched earth tactics to the Allied troops. All factories, power plants and roads had to be destroyed to slow down the advance of the enemy.

A coal mine in Penzberg, near the border with Austria, was deemed to be one of the resources that must not fall into US hands. However, the majority of the town's inhabitants earned their living from the mine, and therefore on 28th April they deposed the city's Nazi mayor before he could blow the mine.

German troops arrived and executed the coup's eight instigators on the spot. But this was not enough for Zöberlein, who had long despised the inhabitants' ambivalent attitude towards Nazism. On the night of 29th April, Zöberlein's Werewolves spread through the town murdering critics of the Nazi regime and dispatching a list of Zöberlein's personal enemies. Some managed to escape, but eight people, including a heavily pregnant woman, were lynched. When US forces reached Penzberg the next day, the bodies were still swinging, each with a sign saying "SS Werewolf, Upper Bavaria" around their neck.

Hitler committed suicide on 30th April. In his will, he left his thousand year realm to Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz,

## WEREWOLF HANDBOOK





In the summer of 1940, Ilse Hirsch graced the cover of the German army's magazine *Signal*.



SIGNAL SEPTEMBER 1940

## Oppenhoff's murderers got off lightly

The trial against Franz Oppenhoff's killers was heard in 1949 in a West German court. The Werewolves were charged with the murder of an innocent civilian but, thanks to their lawyer, all got off lightly.

The Werewolves' defender claimed that Oppenhoff had been in uniform in 1944. Under wartime laws, he was therefore a deserter and could be executed without a trial.

■ Ilse Hirsch was acquitted. In sentencing, the court accepted that she had blindly trusted the Nazi regime, believing that "state and individual are one ... and everything is legal which is of aid to Germany and ordered from above."

■ The guides, Karl-Heinz Hennemann and Georg Heidorn, were sentenced to 12 and 18 months in prison.

■ The then 16-year-old Erich Morgenschweiss was not charged. He testified against his accomplices.

■ Herbert Wenzel fled abroad after the war and disappeared without a trace.

who almost immediately began peace talks with the Allies.

On 6th May 1945, the admiral made an urgent radio appeal to the Werewolves, asking that "all German men and women ... abstain from any underground fighting activity in the Werwolf or any other organisations in the enemy-occupied western territories, since such activity can only be to the detriment of our people."

Two days later, the German Instrument of Surrender was signed. The war was over. However, not all the Werewolves gave up the fight immediately. Together with some SS troops, a number of them entrenched themselves in the large Segeberger forest north of Hamburg, where they held out against Britain's 11th Armoured Division.

When Dönitz heard that the guerrillas were refusing to lay down their arms, he sent paratroopers to the area, with British consent. The fighting raged for two days, with Germans firing on Germans. By the time the last Werewolves surrendered, the forest was thick with corpses.

### 5,000 youths died

In other parts of Germany, small Werewolf units continued to blow up bridges, set buildings on fire

and set makeshift traps on the roads. In eastern Germany, Soviet troops hunted down the Werewolves – five months after Germany's capitulation, intelligence chief Lavrentey Beria told Stalin that 359 Werewolf units had been "liquidated."

During 1945 and 1946, the Soviets arrested around 10,000 German teens for being members of Werewolf groups. Under torture, many of them confessed that they had not yet been in action, but

had been "waiting" for the right moment to strike. As many as 5,000 Werewolves died in Soviet prison camps. According to reports from Allied soldiers, some Werewolf units continued to operate until 1949, when East and West Germany came into being. ■

### FURTHER READING

● C Whiting: *Werewolf*, Pen & Sword, 1996 ● Michael Fagnon: *SS Werewolf Combat Instruction Manual*, Paladin Press, 1995

British soldiers contemplate a dead German civilian who had shot at them.

SCALA ARCHIVES





Hitler's  
last attack:



# ARDENNES OFFENSIVE

*On 16th December 1944, thousands of artillery guns paved the way for German armoured forces to hammer through the US defensive line in the Ardennes in Belgium. The goal was the key strategic port at Antwerp – and to capture four Allied armies in the north. To ensure success, Hitler sent in battle-hardened troops from the Eastern Front who fought with a ferocity the US had never seen.*





*The German offensive needed to scare the Allies into peace talks. To that end, Hitler unleashed 200,000 elite soldiers with orders that "the battle must be fought with brutality and all resistance must be broken in a wave of terror".*

SCANPIX/ALG-IMAGES

## BELGIUM/1944

Nazi Germany is under pressure from all sides. The Red Army has proved unstoppable in the east, the Allies are drumming through Italy in the south, and in the west, US and British forces are at the Rhine and ready to enter Germany.







*The offensive began with a hellish bombardment that sent US forces running.*

SCANPIX/AGF-IMAGES

BY ESBEN SYLVEST

A strange sight met the US sentry as he looked east towards the German lines on the morning of 16th December 1944. From his lookout post outside the city of Clervaux in the Ardennes, he suddenly saw wide cones of light illuminating the fog in the dark sky around him. He had only just managed to radio through a report about the lights to his commanding officer when shells began hammering down on his foxhole.

Minutes later, the artillery died out, and the darkness resonated heavily with the rumble of tanks. In the light of the powerful floodlights, the Germans had launched a large-scale offensive to save the Third Reich. Over a 100-kilometre-wide front, heavy German armour was on the move and tens of thousands of infantrymen followed behind.

## Offensive was Hitler's last chance

The hilly Belgian forest area of the Ardennes along the German border was the last place the Allies were expecting a German offensive. As a result, the area

## The Germans' battle plan

# Blitzkrieg must end war in west

200,000 German soldiers had to fight their way through the Ardennes and secure control of the vital port of Antwerp. The action would also trap four Allied armies in the Netherlands.

**2 River Meuse** German troops must advance rapidly across the Meuse. North of the river, the terrain is flatter and more passable.

**1 Antwerp** The port city is a lifeline for the Allies and ensures them vital supplies. The city is therefore a key goal for the offensive.

**4 St. Vith** This Ardennes city is another traffic hub. The Germans plan to control St. Vith by the second day of the offensive, so that their troops can continue to use the road network.

**3 Bastogne** Seven major roads meet near the city. For the Germans, it is crucial to capture the traffic hub quickly so that they can advance towards the Meuse via main roads.

## DWIGHT D EISENHOWER

Commander-in-chief of the Allied forces in Europe. The five-star general and West Point military academy graduate had led the invasion of Normandy six months earlier. Now he was overseeing the Battle of the Bulge from his HQ in Paris.

- 83,000 soldiers
- 242 tanks
- 576 self-propelled artillery





was only weakly defended. The few troops there were primarily new recruits who had just arrived from the US, along with decimated and exhausted units that needed to recover. That was why Hitler had chosen the area as the perfect place to break through the Allied defensive lines. Together with his general staff, he had devised a bold plan.

Three army units would occupy Antwerp, a key supply port for the Allies. If the Germans captured it, they could prevent reinforcements from reaching the continent and, more importantly, they could encircle four Allied armies in northern Belgium and the Netherlands.

In the build-up, the Germans secretly transported 200,000 battle-hardened soldiers to the front. Hitler also ordered the last of his well-functioning armoured divisions, as well as thousands of artillery guns, forward to support the men. The moment of surprise was so crucial to the Germans that even the operation's code name – *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine) – had been

**The 6th SS Panzer Army attacked on the northernmost front. Its goal was to secure Antwerp.**

ULLSTEIN BILD



chosen to throw any Allied spies off the scent. *Wacht am Rhein* had to trick the Allies into believing that Hitler was preparing a defence, rather than a comprehensive offensive. And to take advantage of the moment of surprise, the German troops needed to move forward quickly so that the Allies wouldn't have time to mobilise reinforcements. On day one, they had to cross the largely inaccessible, snow-covered terrain of the Ardennes and quickly take control of the area's main roads and bridges. One of the most important hubs was the city of Bastogne, which had to be taken within a day to secure the advance. According to the battle plan, the troops had a maximum of four days to cross the River Meuse in the north-west; from there the terrain flattened out and the roads towards Antwerp would be more accessible.

### Weakened division at Bastogne

When all hell broke loose on 16th December, the attack came as a total surprise to the Allies. Not least for the soldiers from the US's 28th Infantry Division, who had been sent to the area to recover after months of fierce fighting. The division's commander, Colonel Hurley Fuller, was awoken abruptly by the noise of a furious German cannonade. His troops in Clervaux controlled several roads to Bastogne, and immediately after the offensive started, a clear-cut order arrived from Fuller's commander, Dwight D Eisenhower: the positions at Clervaux had to be held at all costs.

However, the Germans' advance was so rapid that the first tank rolled into Clervaux just a few hours later. The outer lines of defence had been overrun, and now the Germans were clearing the

city house by house. Hundreds of shells smashed Clervaux to ruins, and veterans from the Eastern Front quickly defeated the city's US defenders. When a German tank began shelling the hotel containing Fuller's command post, the colonel tried to escape with his officers and dozens of wounded soldiers, but it was too late. As the group crawled out of a window at the back of the building, they could already hear Germans shouting and crashing through the hotel's rooms. Fuller headed out of town, going west towards the Allies' lines, but it wasn't long before a German patrol caught him.

### Chaotic first hours

As the German meteorologists had predicted, the weather was with Hitler's troops. Thick cloud lay over the Ardennes, preventing Allied pilots coming to the aid of the desperate ground forces.

For the Germans, everything progressed according to plan during the first few hours. After the capture of Clervaux, the soldiers were able to continue their advance on Bastogne.

At the Losheim Gap near the Luxembourg border, the Germans were making as much progress as at Clervaux. A US patrol in the area reported that the place was "crawling with Krauts" before beating a hasty retreat. From a nearby village, a US garrison sent a panicked radio message about enemy guns opening fire on their command post from 70 metres away. It was their last message. The attack killed three soldiers; the remaining 87 surrendered.

The operation was unfolding exactly as planned. Hitler and his generals had calculated that the Allies' new recruits would surrender or flee the first time ►



OLIVIER LUNDA

### GERD VON RUNDSTEDT

Hitler gave von Rundstedt responsibility for the offensive despite the field marshal's doubts about the plan. He considered it too ambitious and foolhardy, and proposed a smaller attack, which Hitler rejected.

- 200,000 soldiers
- 500 tanks
- 1,900 self-propelled artillery



SCOTT/APR



16th-25th December

## Bitter resistance stopped the Germans

Although Hitler's attack came as a surprise, the Allied forces offered fierce resistance. The Germans had also underestimated the enemy's mobility. In the first week alone, Eisenhower managed to deploy 250,000 Allied troops to the Ardennes. Slowly but surely, the German offensive was grinding to a halt.



*US forces slowed the Germans' advance in the snow-covered forests.*

ULLSTEIN BILD

they encountered a superior enemy. Still, the advance soon began to stall. Once the initial shock had subsided, the outnumbered US troops began to fight fearlessly.

At Wahlhausen, a little east of Clervaux, one of Fuller's divisions even requested artillery to fire on its own position in a desperate last attempt to stop the German panzers. Only a single US soldier survived the shelling.

### **Eastern Front tactics won the battle**

While German forces in the north were blocked by bitter resistance, the Nazis were close to breaking through in the south. On 17th December, a battle group from 1st SS Panzer Division penetrated deep behind Allied lines. It was led by 29-year-old Joachim Peiper, whose habit of razing Russian settlements to the ground had led to

one of his units being dubbed the Blowtorch Battalion.

Now, Peiper was rumbling through the Ardennes with his 100 tanks, alongside a group of giant Tiger II tanks from another armoured unit.

A US scout who saw the battle group moving through the Ardennes felt the earth move under the massive tracked vehicles. One German was using a torch to direct the "biggest damn tank" the American had ever seen. At almost 70 tonnes, the Royal Tiger was the largest tank in World War II, carrying 180-mm thick armour plates and a precise 88-mm gun that could pulverise a US Sherman tank at 700 metres.

In direct combat, the US troops didn't stand a chance, and many Allied tank crews disappeared at the sight of the Royal Tigers. The few who chose to fight faced a grim fate. US tanks often

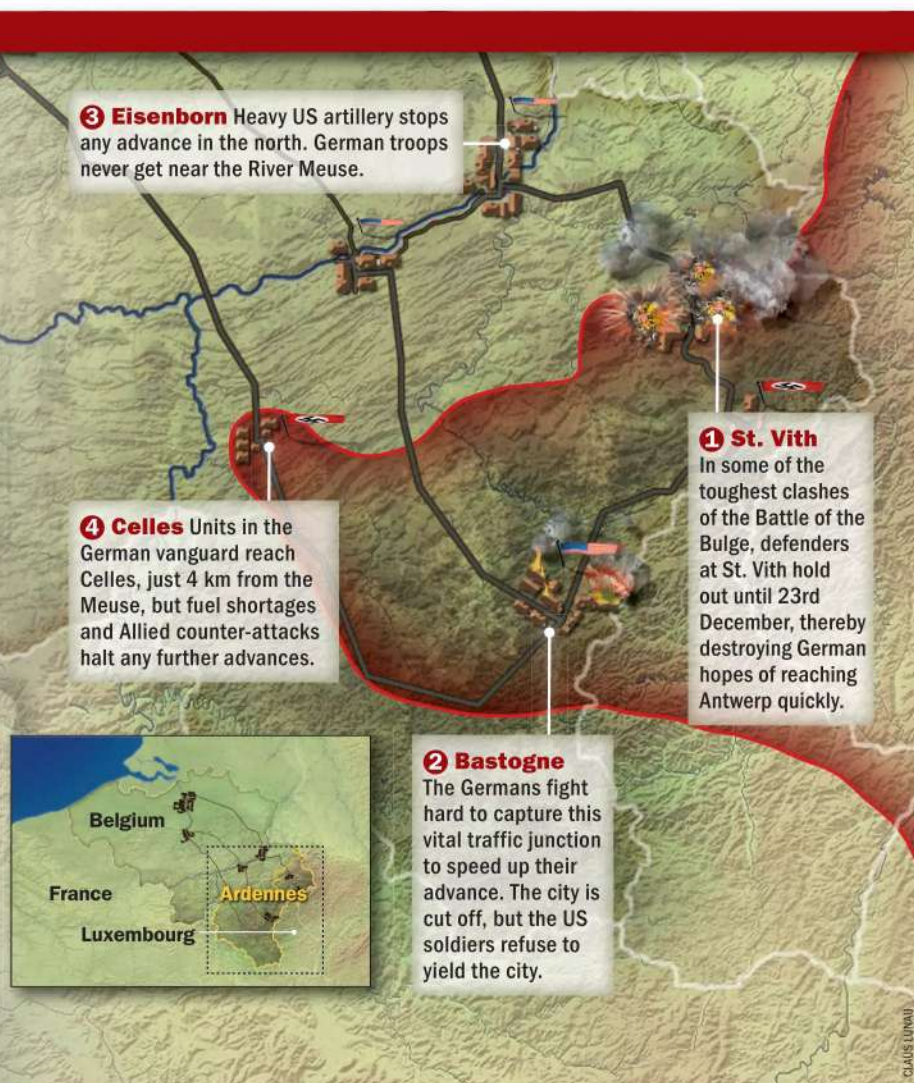
lurked behind hilltops in the hope of surprising the Germans, but the panzer units used a counter-tactic developed on the Eastern Front. The moment they crested a summit, the crew fired flares that dazzled enemy drivers and silhouetted the tanks, making them easy targets. The Americans barely had time to register what was happening before shells from the German tanks set their vehicles ablaze.

### **Massacres became routine**

Peiper's mission was to move west into the Allies' rear, partly to pave the way for other German units, and partly to spread terror and trigger an Allied collapse.

On 17th December, Peiper's men led a group of captured US soldiers out into a field near the town of Malmedy and mowed them down with machine





guns. In the panic that ensued, some of the POWs escaped, but back on the frost-cold field lay 84 dead Americans.

The Allies also resorted to sporadic 'liquidations' of their enemies. On both sides, the fate of prisoners often depended on the mood of the soldiers. If they had just seen their own comrades killed, agitation could lead to spontaneous retaliation. At other times, the troops couldn't afford to guard POWs and simply shot them instead.

#### Schedule slipped

After days of fighting, the Allied resistance was so fierce that the Germans were still contesting key positions that, according to the battle plan, should have been taken in hours. Along the entire front, Allied engineering troops blew up bridges, leaving German units to make detours

or wait for new bridges to be built. A well-placed TNT charge could do more damage than a hundred rifles, something that Peiper – who cursed "the damned engineers" – realised when his unit was slowed by another broken bridge near the town of Stavelot.

To the south, the remnants of Fuller's regiment were still fighting to delay the German advance towards Bastogne, exchanging their lives to win precious time so that the Allied troops further back could dig in and benefit from reinforcements. Of the regiment's 5,000 soldiers, only 532 came through the German offensive unscathed.

#### Veterans saved Bastogne

The US 101st Airborne Division – known as the Screaming Eagles – was resting in north-eastern France at the start of the offensive after intense ►

## Special forces spread panic

In the midst of the Ardennes Offensive, Lieutenant Colonel Otto Skorzeny launched Operation Greif, in which small units of English-speaking German soldiers dressed in US uniforms sneaked behind enemy lines in stolen jeeps. The groups tried to secure bridges over the Meuse River and sow confusion in the enemy's rear.

Among the Allies, rumours of Skorzeny's soldiers' incursion spread quickly, and the US launched a massive hunt for the disguised men. Military police set up checkpoints where soldiers were questioned about things only true Americans could answer – such as the name of Mickey Mouse's girlfriend. The hunt led to a number of humorous incidents. For example, General Omar Bradley was arrested, even though he correctly identified Springfield as the capital of Illinois – the military police officer erroneously insisted it was Chicago.



**Skorzeny's captured infiltrators were shot as spies when the Americans caught them.**



26th December–25th January

## The Allies struck back

CLAUS LUNAU

The counter-offensive picked up speed as the weather cleared. Allied aircraft dominated the air, and from the south General George Patton rushed to help battle the 3rd Panzer Army. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery attacked south from the Netherlands.



**1 Bad weather** has kept Allied planes on the ground, but on 23rd December it clears up, enabling the Allies to take advantage of their air superiority. Fighters and bombers attack German troops on the roads.

**2 Celles** During the withdrawal, the Germans are forced to leave behind hundreds of tanks and artillery guns, not least because of a lack of fuel. Around Celles alone, the Germans lose 82 tanks and 83 guns.

**3 Bastogne** The hard-pressed forces in Bastogne are rescued on 27th December, when Patton's forces reach the city and break the siege.

**4 Houffalize** Montgomery, from the north, and Patton, from the south, meet on 16th January. The front line is now more or less where it was before the German offensive.

fighting in the Netherlands. However, the German offensive in the Ardennes forced them back to the battlefield. On 18th December, the unit was hurriedly picked up in trucks and driven to Bastogne to strengthen the defence of the vital hub.

As the paratroopers from the division marched along the last stretch of road towards the city, they met terrified US soldiers streaming the other way.

"Run! Run! They'll murder you! They'll kill you! They've got everything! Tanks, machine guns, air power, everything," the men shouted in panic.

But the Screaming Eagles, like the Germans, were battle-hardened soldiers. Shrugging off the warnings, they quickly established a defensive ring of foxholes around Bastogne.

The whole city was being fortified by the veterans, who had arrived in a such a hurry that they had neither food nor winter uniforms. The cold was intense and the snow fell incessantly over Bastogne. At night, the men slept closely together to keep warm. During the day, they reinforced their positions with tree trunks to protect themselves from shrapnel, but without axes, the work was a major operation. In some places, the defenders instead chose to pile up the frozen corpses of German soldiers to protect the foxholes.

On 21st December – four days later than planned – the Germans finally surrounded Bastogne. Around 12,000 US soldiers were now trapped.

### Only one magazine per man

The next day, four Germans approached with a large white flag. They carried a demand that the Allies in Bastogne surrender or suffer dire consequences. Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe of the 101st Airborne Division flatly rejected the demand, memorably penning a one-word response to the German commander that simply said: "Nuts!"

As the fighting intensified and the siege of Bastogne continued, both food and ammunition began to run low.

North of the city, the gun position covering the road between Bastogne and Foy had only three shells left. And the soldiers regarded their remaining ammunition with trepidation. There was just one magazine of cartridges per man and

*In the course of a month, the Allies deployed almost 700,000 troops to Belgium. With their help, the Allies finally broke the Germans.*

TOP PHOTO



one box of cartridges per machine gun. The situation was dire, but help finally came from above. On 23rd December, the weather cleared up sufficiently to enable C-47 cargo planes to defy the fierce fire from the German anti-aircraft guns and come to the rescue of Bastogne's defenders. The pilots dropped food and ammunition from the sky and, in a daring manoeuvre, a team of volunteer surgeons landed in gliders on the city's streets. Immediately, they began to operate on the wounded in a nearby workshop.

The intervention sealed the fate of the offensive. Bastogne could not be captured, and the advance had come to a complete halt in the north. Only Peiper's group had made it through and was still operating behind enemy lines, but on the same day as Bastogne was saved, Peiper became cut off from the Germans' main force and thus from supplies and fuel.

The battle group dug in to await reinforcements that never came. Finally, Peiper and his men were forced to fight their way back to the German lines, but had to abandon most of their heavy vehicles. The materiel they left behind was missed for the rest of the war.

### George Patton broke the siege

Three days later, the siege of Bastogne was finally broken when tanks from General George Patton's US Third Army hurried up from the south. At the village of Assenois, 19-year-old recruit James Hendrix gained legendary status when, all alone, he stormed a position with two German 88-mm anti-tank guns.

When a German soldier stuck his head up out of a nearby foxhole, Hendrix shot him before running on to another foxhole and striking the German there with his rifle butt. Then he continued on to the two anti-tank guns, where the crew surrendered to the young soldier without a fight. Hendrix received the prestigious Medal of Honor for his daring attack.

By the time Patton's Third Army lifted the siege of Bastogne, the Germans' high-profile offensive had long since crumbled. It was more or less stalled across the entire front, and the Allies had taken the initiative.

The German generals knew now that they couldn't cross the River Meuse and reach Antwerp. The expected, broad breakthrough in the Ardennes had

## The SS slaughtered US prisoners of war

During the Battle of the Bulge, Hitler ordered his troops to fight as brutally as they had on the Eastern Front in the hope of terrorising the Allied troops. Up until that point, the fighting in the West had been relatively 'honourable', but that changed on 17th December. SS soldiers, under the command of Colonel Joachim Peiper, lined up 120 US prisoners of war in a field near the

village of Malmedy. The majority were mowed down by waiting machine guns, while survivors were finished off with close-range shots to the neck. A small group managed to escape to a nearby café, which was barricaded and set on fire by the Germans. A total of 84 Americans lost their lives in the Malmedy massacre, the first of its kind on the Western Front.



failed to materialise. German Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt took on the heavy burden of conveying the news to Hitler, who, as usual, was not receptive to bad news. Hitler was still convinced that his army was on the verge of the great breakthrough.

"Everything has changed in the west. Success – complete success – is now in our grasp!" exclaimed the Führer.

### The war was finally lost

Around New Year, Hitler finally realised the seriousness of the situation and launched another offensive, further south, in Alsace. The aim was to force the Allies away from the Ardennes and breathe new life into his assault.

At the same time, the Luftwaffe launched one last gigantic offensive, bombing Allied airfields in Belgium and the Netherlands with great success. Nearly 500 Allied planes were destroyed, but the price was too high. The Luftwaffe lost 280 aircraft and never recovered. The Allied losses were replaced within a few weeks.

It wasn't until 7th January 1945, when the Germans were being pushed

back on all fronts, that Hitler gave the green light for the German withdrawal. In the following weeks, the German divisions battled their way back towards German territory. The majority took up positions on the Siegfried Line – the elongated fortification along Germany's western border that was supposed to protect the Fatherland from the Allies. Here they prepared to wait for the now inevitable enemy invasion.

The bill for the offensive was outrageous. Around 19,000 US soldiers lost their lives, and thousands more were incapacitated or ended up in German captivity. The US had never lost so many soldiers in a single battle before, and never has since.

For the Germans, the losses were equally high, and the offensive drained the army of its last effective forces and materiel – the war had finally been lost for the Germans.

### FURTHER READING

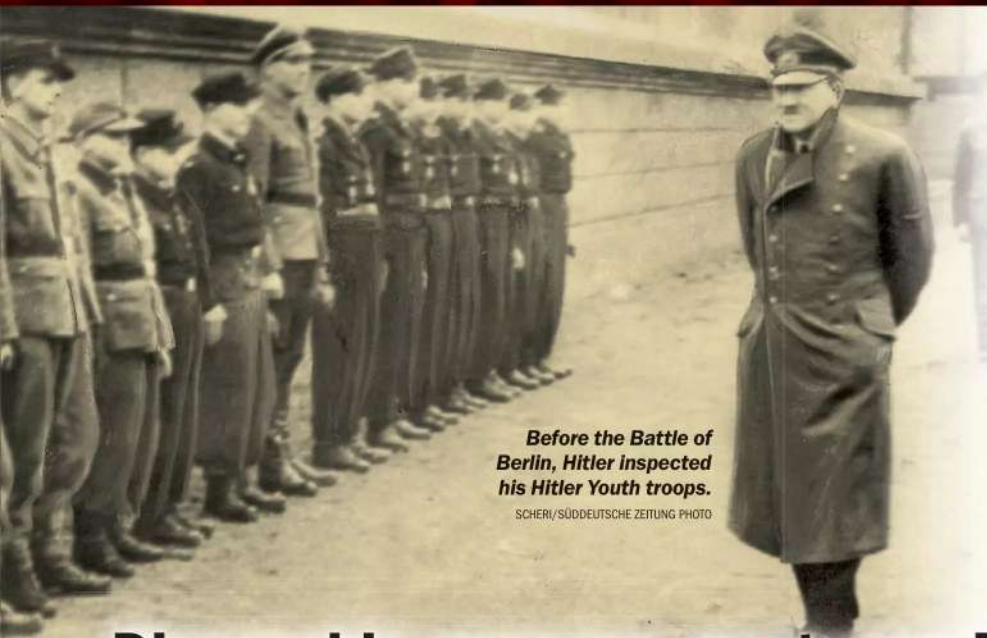
• James Arnold: *The Battle of the Bulge*, Osprey Publishing, 2004 • John Toland: *Battle – The Story of the Bulge*, Bison Books, 1999 • Stephen E Ambrose: *Band of Brothers*, Pocket Books, 2001



# THIRD REICH AT WAR







*Before the Battle of Berlin, Hitler inspected his Hitler Youth troops.*

SCHERL/SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO

## EASTERN FRONT/1944

The Soviet Union's modern tanks are advancing rapidly along the Eastern Front with minimal resistance. The Wehrmacht must find new and effective military strategies if it is to prevent Berlin from being overrun.



# Disposable weapons must save Berlin:

# PANZERFAUST

*Soviet tanks pummelled the German front relentlessly. In a desperate effort to secure victory for the Nazis, Hitler's engineers invented a new wonder weapon.*



armband to inform the world that they were now part of the German army. The soldiers marched with serious, reserved faces – they knew that in a few months' time they'd be meeting two million Soviet soldiers in a final, exhausting defence of Berlin. Yet the ranks still buzzed with nervous anticipation.

They were excited because while only half the men possessed rifles, the rest were equipped with a brand-new superweapon: a *Panzerfaust* (armour fist), an anti-tank weapon that had achieved cult status with the city's remaining inhabitants. The tubular weapon possessed huge advantages: it was simple to operate and had a devastating effect on Berlin's greatest

threat, the Soviet tanks. But the Panzerfaust had its drawbacks too.

First, it was a disposable, single-use weapon. This was extremely unfortunate for an army that was otherwise largely unarmed. The otherwise rudimentarily trained men had been handed an almost impossible task, yet everyone was desperate to believe the wonder weapon could turn the war around.

### Stones against tanks

Germans at the front also cheered when they got the Panzerfaust. For the first time, the Germans had a weapon that could penetrate the enemy's armour.

Of all the Red Army's tanks, it was the legendary T-34 that posed the greatest threat. Its powerful gun and ►

BY BORIS KOLL

**O**n 12th November 1944, Berlin's Brandenburg Gate bore witness to a strange spectacle. The newly formed *Volkssturm* (People's Storm) held a parade in front of propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels.

It was a sad sight. The *Volkssturm* was the reserve's reserve, consisting of older men, up to the age of sixty, and boys as young as 12. Everyone was in civilian clothes, with only a single



fast speed had made it superior to all German anti-tank guns since 1941.

On several occasions, panic had broken out among German units when the tanks broke through their lines in large numbers. Soldiers had been forced to resort to risky measures.

One tactic was to grab an anti-tank mine, run behind a tank and place the mine on it. The soldiers then had ten seconds to find cover before the tank exploded. However, that wasn't always enough: two German soldiers successfully placed a mine under the rear of a tank. But the explosion blew off the turret, which landed right on top of them. Another improvised method was to attach a smoke grenade to a 20-litre can of gasoline and fling it at the tank chassis. This tactic wasn't without risk either; from the moment the grenade was armed, it took only 4.5 seconds before it exploded.

## Army made strict demands

Sheer desperation ensured there was nothing German soldiers wouldn't try. They used shovels and axes to open the hatches of Soviet tanks and smash their vital cooling components. Or they rammed stones into the gun barrel, so that it exploded during firing.

In the meantime, the SS and military threw themselves into the task of



**While other anti-tank weapons bounced off tanks, the Panzerfaust's explosive jet was devastatingly effective in penetrating them.**

SZ PHOTO/SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO

producing a new and more effective anti-tank weapon in early autumn 1941. Requirements were both precise and strict: the weapon must be able to penetrate 70-100 mm of armour, have a reasonable range and be light and mobile so soldiers could carry it with them anywhere. In addition, it needed to be cheap and easy to mass-produce. One final requirement was perhaps the most important: the weapon should be so simple to use that anyone could fire it with virtually no training.

Engineers at the HASAG armaments group in Leipzig offered a solution in November 1942. They proposed what was known as a hollow charge or

shaped charge, in which the shell was fired from a hand-held tube. Tests had already demonstrated that their prototype – the *Faustpatrone* (first cartridge) – could break through 140-mm armoured steel from up to 70 metres away. The shaped charge allowed all the explosive force to be channelled into a small area, meaning that a mere 56 grams of explosive was enough to penetrate a tank hull.

HASAG received the green light, and the first 5,000 units were delivered in August 1943. Feedback from the front wasn't universally positive, however. The *Faustpatrone* had a round warhead, which often bounced off the T-34 tank, and so engineers swiftly refined the model to create the larger *Panzerfaust* Gross. Finally, the long-awaited anti-tank weapon was a reality. The warhead's shape had been altered and now contained 400g of explosives, with the sensational ability to penetrate 200-mm armoured steel. If the German soldier fired it from the recommended range of 30 metres, the Soviet tank was breached 75-80 percent of the time. In most cases, therefore, one man plus one shot would result in one destroyed tank.

## Elderly civilians fought with the disposable weapon

The Wehrmacht was convinced that the *Panzerfaust* was the perfect weapon for the *Volkssturm*. Many of those civilians suddenly thrust into the role of soldiers in 1944 had never learned to shoot a rifle. They therefore had to be introduced to a weapon that was both simple to

**Volk  
ans  
Gewehr!**

operate and quick to learn due to a lack of available time for military training. Some civilians were working up to 72 hours a week to keep the German war machine operating, and so were only free to train on Sunday. This time pressure meant it was stipulated that instruction could last no more than four hours a day. The *Volkssturm* were given a maximum of 14 Sundays to train before they were deemed ready.

When the army found itself pressured to supply weapons to the *Volkssturm* in January 1945, it sent the civilian army a mere 13,000 rifles in addition to 100,000 *Panzerfaust*.

**Late in the war, Germans were mobilised under the slogan "People to arms".**



## Anyone could use a Panzerfaust

The new weapon had met all its requirements, yet it proved extremely simple to operate. The user placed the approximately metre-long weapon in the crook of their arm, aimed at their target using the pop-up sight, and fired. It was no more complicated than that. German propaganda emphasised how easy it was to use the weapon. In a film from the end of the war, German cinemagoers watched a civilian woman being trained, the implied point being that even a housewife could learn to use it. And if the user became confused, operating instructions were pasted on to the tube as a reminder.

By the end of 1943, HASAG had produced 350,000 *Panzerfaust*, and they were sorely needed. The Germans continued to lose tanks far faster than they could build new ones, and the army increasingly had to rely on small arms. The defeat at Stalingrad in 1943 had effectively sealed the Third Reich's fate, and from then on, things went badly for the German troops, who ►



# Simple weapon defeated tanks

**Most anti-tank weapons required the skills of a well-trained soldier – but not the Germans' new weapon. With a firm grip, anyone could destroy an armoured tank.**

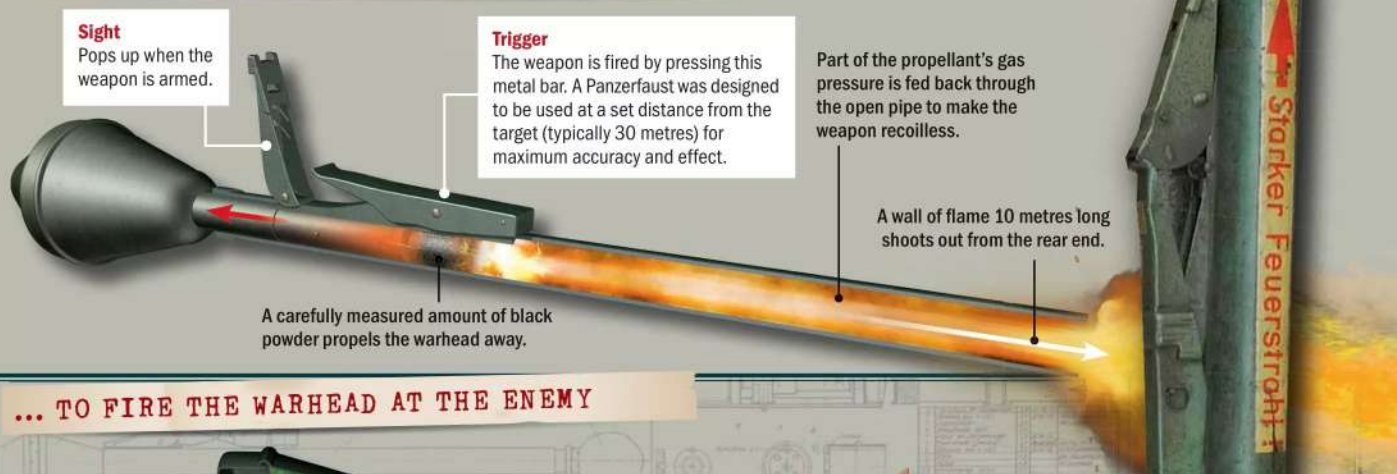
The secret behind the devastating effect of the Panzerfaust is known as the 'Munroe effect'.

As early as the 1880s, US chemist Charles Edward Munroe had observed how a cone-shaped hollow charge changes an explosive's

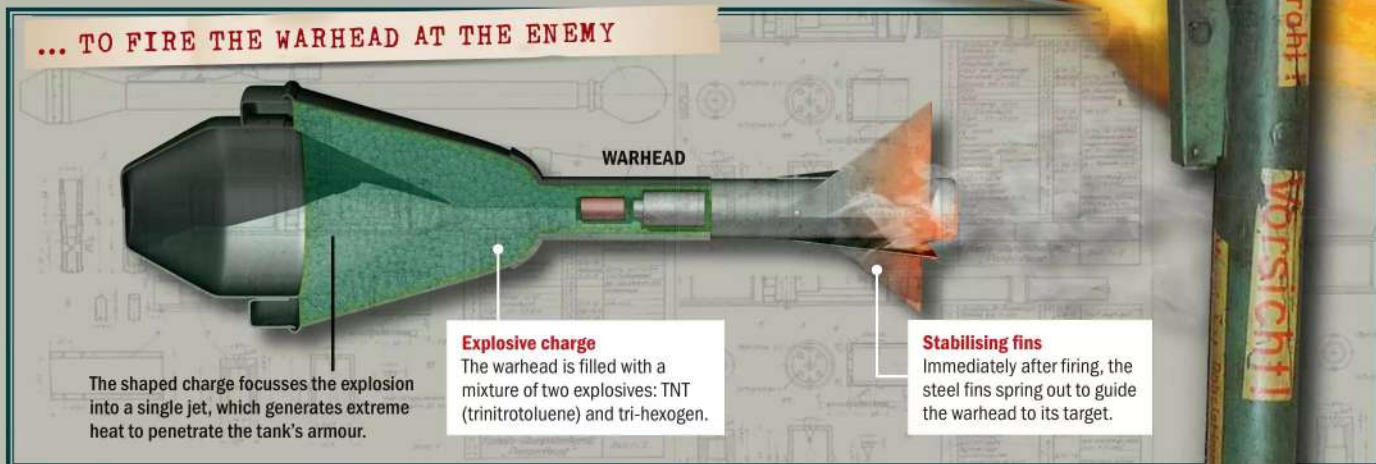
properties. Instead of exploding across the surface with little effect, shaped charges focussed the explosive into a thin jets, super-heated to several thousand degrees and capable of drilling with great force through armoured plates up to

200mm thick. At the same time, the Allies also developed similar weapons. While German HASAG engineers worked on the Panzerfaust, US scientists used shaped charges to create bazookas, which were introduced in 1942.

## THE WEAPON'S SIMPLE DESIGN MADE IT EASY...



## ... TO FIRE THE WARHEAD AT THE ENEMY



### PANZERFAUST 60 FACTS

Produced:	1944-45
Application:	Firing from the armpit or shoulder
Breakthrough force:	200-mm armoured steel
Muzzle velocity:	45 metres per second
Range:	30, 60 and 100 metres
Quantity produced:	Up to 400,000 per month

### BENEFITS

**The weapon was so simple** that it could be operated by anyone after a few minutes' training.

**The Panzerfaust was light, easy to handle** and could be carried just about anywhere.

**The weapon enabled a single man** to destroy an enemy tank from a safe distance.

### DRAWBACKS

**Inconsistent quality.** Around one in 20 Panzerfaust were damp squibs.

**Safety wasn't top-notch.** In several cases, Panzerfaust exploded the moment they were warmed, killing their operators on the spot.

**A plume of flame** and large puff of smoke made it impossible for the user to remain hidden.

**The Panzerfaust carried instructions so that anyone could use it.**

TURBOSQUID

**Safety clearance was 10 metres because of the lengthy flame.**

SCHERL/SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO



***The Panzerfaust was designed to be operated by anyone, even civilians and children.***

SZ PHOTO / SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO

81,116	Red Army deaths
458,080	German soldiers killed
479,298	German prisoners
c 100,000	German civilian casualties



soldiers. Of those, well over half (110) fell victim to a Panzerfaust. During battles in large cities, the statistics were even better. Here the Panzerfaust operators could lurk in the rubble waiting for a Soviet tank to emerge.

The new weapon wasn't flawless, however. During winter warfare on the Eastern Front, German soldiers found it difficult to keep their fuses dry, which led to many failing to fire. Another disadvantage was that the black powder generated visible fumes, which meant when fired a puff of smoke and flame made it impossible for operators to keep themselves hidden, exposing them to heavy shelling from enemy lines.

But the Red Army quickly gained respect for the weapon. T-34s now required protection from their troops, and time and time again, tank commanders chose to halt their push and wait for the infantry. It helped drain some of the momentum and drive from the Soviet war machine.

#### **The final battle cost dear**

Ultimately, however, it would be the makeshift Volkssturm army who proved most dependent on the Panzerfaust. In theory, civilian mobilisation should have involved six million men, but in practice only 700 battalions, each comprising 1,600 men, were formed – around 1.12 million

men in total. This was partly due to a dire shortage of weapons – the regular Germany army was already undersupplied, and it was impossible to source another six million small arms, although the depots were emptied of captured rifles.

Many Volkssturm units possessed only a few rifles to share, and several went as far as to empty museums of antique muskets and even crossbows. It would prove disastrous when production of the Panzerfaust fell dramatically in the spring of 1945.

Allied planes were now constantly bombing the arms factories, and the Ruhr industrial region, which supplied the steel for the launch tubes, found itself on the front line. The district was

home to a large part of the German war industry, and it was subject to constant attack. By the end of April, things came to a head for the hard-pressed German army: the Soviets surrounded the German capital and launched their final attack. The city's defence comprised just 45,000 regular soldiers, plus police, Hitler Youth and around 40,000 Volkssturm troops. The Battle of Berlin cost up to 120,000 Germans their lives. Of those, 100,000 were civilians.

In the end, Hitler got his "total war" – one that mobilised all society to fight – but the Panzerfaust ultimately became a mere symbol of futile resistance.

After Germany's defeat, Panzerfaust manufacturer HASAG fared no better. Some factories were blown up, while those that survived were transferred to the Soviet Union as war reparations in 1947. ■



**Tank crews mounted old bed springs to protect themselves from Panzerfaust.**  
ANG IMAGES

#### **FURTHER READING**

● Wolfgang Fleischer: **Panzerfaust and Other German Infantry Anti-Tank Weapons**, Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2004

#### **The Hitler Youth defended Berlin in small bicycle units armed with Panzerfaust.**

SZ PHOTO/SÜDDEUTSCHE-ZEITUNG PHOTO





# EYEWITNESSES to the downfall

*As advancing Soviet forces and Allied aircraft bombarded Berlin, Hitler was forced to move permanently into the Führerbunker. With him were his personal aides and loyal supporters, all of whom witnessed what happened during the dictator's final days, including his birthday celebrations, his wedding and finally his suicide.*

Adolf Hitler

**BREATH OF FRESH AIR**  
*This photo is believed to be the last to show Adolf Hitler alive. The dictator briefly left the confines of the bunker to inspect the ruins of the Reich Chancellery.*

SCALA/BPK

## QUICK OVERVIEW

**Background:** World War II was coming to an end and the German capital, Berlin, was under constant fire. Hitler decided to permanently relocate to the Führerbunker.

**Events:** During the last 14 days of his life, Hitler hoped that a miracle would turn the war around.

**Consequence:** When Hitler died, the old ties of loyalty were broken, and his supporters could finally surrender.

BERLIN  
GERMANY



# With Hitler in the Führerbunker



**BODYGUARD**  
**ROCHUS MISCH**



**SECRETARY**  
**TRAUDL JUNGE**



**CHAUFFEUR**  
**ERICH KEMPKA**



**MINISTER**  
**ALBERT SPEER**



**PILOT**  
**HANNA REITSCH**

BY TORSTEN WEPER

**Monday, 16th April 1945**

For several months, the Red Army has been preparing to storm Berlin. Now 2.5 million Soviet soldiers launch their final offensive from the east bank of the River Oder, 100 kilometres west of Berlin, where Hitler has dug in.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** Sometime in mid-April, 'bunker life' began. Hitler descended into the place where he would die. Eva never left his side. All situation conferences were now held in the Führerbunker map room, and the bunker telephone switchboard had to be manned around the clock. Our SS bodyguard commander Franz Schädle came up to me: "Misch, you are going down there with them."

I was surrounded by cold, damp, glaring white artificial light. To know that Hitler had to live and suffer under the same conditions was of little comfort. Or should I say, it gave me no comfort? Now it was no longer time to think of others, not even the Führer. One had one's own problems to attend to.

**MINISTER OF ARMAMENTS ALBERT SPEER:** Even during this last period of his life, in April 1945, I still occasionally sat with Hitler in the bunker bent over the building plans for Linz, mutely contemplating the dreams of yesteryear. His study, roofed with more than sixteen feet of concrete and topped with six feet of earth, was undoubtedly the safest place in Berlin. When heavy bombs exploded in the vicinity this massive bunker shook ... Hitler would give a start. What had become of the formerly fearless corporal of the First World War?

**Friday 20th April**

US troops occupy Nuremberg. Berlin remains under intense fire from the Soviets.

**CHAUFFEUR ERICH KEMPKA:** On the Führer's fifty-sixth birthday, 20th April 1945, I reflected on past years when the German people celebrated this day, and held great receptions and parades. When first employed in 1932 I dreamed of being his chauffeur and constant companion on the road, to have a modest place in his attempts for peaceful solutions to the problems we faced.

**MINISTER OF ARMAMENTS ALBERT SPEER:** A delegation of Hitler Youth who had fought well was presented to him in the garden. Hitler spoke a few words ... His voice was low. He broke off rather abruptly.

**SECRETARY TRAUDL JUNGE:** In the evening we sat crammed together in the little study. ▶

PHOTO: ALISTEN BIRD M.F.



## ROCHUS MISCH

During the invasion of Poland in 1939, Rochus Misch was wounded in the stomach by a rifle shot. While in the hospital, he was invited to join SS-Begleitkommando des Führers, Hitler's security detail. Thereafter, Misch served as Hitler's bodyguard and telephone operator. In the bunker, only he and Hitler had the right to bear arms.

## BODYGUARD



Hitler was silent, staring into space. We too asked him if he wouldn't leave Berlin. "No, I can't," he replied. "I must bring things to a head here in Berlin – or go under!"

Hitler had now said out loud what we had all seen: he himself no longer believed in victory. He retired early, and the birthday party broke up. But Eva Braun came back... A restless fire burned in her eyes. She had on a new dress made of silvery blue brocade. Eva Braun wanted to numb the fear that had awoken in her heart. She wanted to celebrate again; she wanted to dance, to drink, to forget.

Eva Braun carried off everyone she met on her way through the bunker up to her old living room on the first floor which was still intact... Someone produced an old gramophone from somewhere with a single record. "Blood-red roses speak of happiness to you..." Eva Braun whirled everyone away in a desperate frenzy, like a woman who has already felt the faint breath of death. We drank champagne, there was shrill laughter, and I laughed too because I didn't want to cry. In the midst of this an explosion silenced the party for a moment, someone hurried to the phone, gleaned more important news. But no one said anything about war, victory or death. This was a party given by ghosts. And the red roses kept on speaking of happiness... I suddenly thought I might throw up any minute.

## Saturday, 21st April

Soviet shells continue to rain down on the Reich Chancellery garden on top of the Führerbunker.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** The last months had not passed Hitler by without leaving their mark. Every defeat, every setback, every act of treason – real or imagined – from within his closest circle contributed to his clearly recognisable physical decay. Now his gait was sluggish, and he dragged a leg. The eyes often seemed to have no fixed point, while his sense

of balance seemed disturbed. Above all, in his every movement he had slowed, and all in all he looked to me like an old man.

## Sunday, 22nd April

Soviet soldiers occupy the districts of Pankow and Karl Horst. With the inner defence ring pierced, Hitler allows some of his staff to leave. A plane stands ready to evacuate them.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** At some time or other the long sleepless night ended in morning. I had nodded off again and was trying to keep myself awake with cognac and chocolate. The situation was more hopeless with every passing minute ... Hitler's hoped-for breach between the Western Powers and the Russians had not come about.

I had the commander-in-chief of the Ninth Army, General Theodor Busse, on the line, and I connected him to [General of the Infantry Wilhelm] Burgdorf... I listened in to the whole conversation – contrary to regulations. I was hoping to find a few sparks of hope, but I found none.

The telephone rang again. Our chief Franz Schädle was on the other end of the line. I had been noting down the main points of reports mentally. For this reason, I extracted only fragments... "Machine – fly out – place reserved, fetch your wife". Suddenly I was wide awake. A place had been reserved for my wife and daughter in one of the last aircraft to leave Berlin... It was almost incredible. I was quite overcome.

**SECRETARY TRAUDL JUNGE:** Feverish restlessness in the bunker... The doors of Hitler's conference room are closed. There's an agitated discussion in progress behind them... At last the heavy iron door opens... Hitler stands motionless... All the expression has vanished from his face; his eyes are blank... He says, "Get changed at once. A plane is leaving in an hour and will take you south. All is lost, hopelessly lost."

I am frozen rigid... Eva Braun is the first to rouse herself. She goes towards Hitler... "But you know I shall stay with you. I'm not letting you send me away." Then Hitler's eyes begin to shine from within, and he does something none of us, not even his closest friends and servants, have ever seen him do before: he kisses Eva Braun on the mouth... I don't want to stay here and I don't want to die, but I can't help it. "I'm staying too," I say.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** I was released from duty and a colleague from the motor pool drove me to Rudow ... I guessed that Gerda and

“Those ... who were here by virtue of their services being indispensable, knew only too well that the only hope of saving our own skins would come after Hitler's death. Therefore we waited for it.

Rochus Misch, Hitler's bodyguard and telephonist



Gitta would be in the air raid shelter ... Gerda fell into my arms straight away. Her reaction to my life-saving news came as a terrible blow to me. She shook her head... Brigitta, our one year-old daughter, had a high fever. Furthermore, she did not want to leave her parents alone in Berlin. I tried to persuade her, mentioned the atrocities committed by the Russians against civilians in East Prussia. But I failed to convince her. "It is the last chance, Gerda," I implored. "The very last!" But she had decided. My wife shook her head sadly.

### Monday, 23rd April

A telegram arrives from Hermann Göring. He wants to know whether Hitler still has 'freedom of action' to lead the country's defence. If not, Göring will take over. Hitler shrieks betrayal and orders the Reichsmarschall's arrest.

**CHAUFFEUR ERICH KEMPKA:** Within the small circle to whom the contents of this telegram were known, it came as a bombshell. Since the failure of the Luftwaffe leadership, there had been a poor relationship between Hitler and the Reichsmarschall, as we knew. None of us had dreamed that Göring would send such a message, however, for he was almost dictating to Hitler. We simple men considered that what Göring was doing amounted to high treason.

**SECRETARY TRAUDL JUNG:** None of us can sleep. We wander round the rooms like shadows, waiting. Sometimes we slip upstairs, wait for a pause in the artillery fire, and are horrified to see the devastation spreading further and further. We are surrounded by ▶

**FÜHRERBUNKER**  
Adolf Hitler lived the last days of his life under several metres of concrete.

SCALA/BPK



Hitler's bed



After Berlin's surrender, hoards of souvenir hunters penetrated the Führerbunker.

POLFO/TOFFOTO & SCANPIX/ARX-IMAGES

## The safest place in Berlin

Hitler's final residence was a self-sufficient community, buried beneath 3.5 metres of concrete, with its own power and water.

**B**y 1936 Hitler had already furnished the basement beneath the Reich Chancellery's ballroom. But after the first Allied air attacks, he feared that the bunker's 1.6-metre-thick concrete ceiling was not sufficient. He therefore ordered the Minister of Armaments, Albert Speer, to build a bunker

with a 3.5 metre concrete ceiling, enough to withstand even the most powerful weapon.

The Führerbunker was ready in January 1945 and was connected to the old bunker via stairs. It was self-sufficient in electricity and water, and held plenty of food. Despite its total area of 300 m<sup>2</sup> and three-metre-high ceilings, the bunker, with its 20 cramped rooms, was uncomfortable.

The air was heavy, the walls made of raw concrete, and infiltrating groundwater made the bunker cold and damp. Berlin's high groundwater table meant that shock waves from bombings far away reached the bunker and made it shake.

Entrance and lookout tower

Entrance

**Hitler's living room**  
Hitler killed himself and Eva Braun committed suicide while sitting on the sofa.

Hitler's bedroom

Map room

Conference room

Goebbels's room

Doctor

Living room

Rochus Misch's switchboard

Stairs to the bunker

Toilets

Eva Braun's room

Hitler's study



## TRAUDL JUNGE

In 1941, Hitler needed a new secretary and held a test for a selection of young women. Among them was 21-year-old Traudl, whom Hitler took a liking to. Traudl was part of a team of four secretaries. She got on well with the staff and married Hitler's valet Hans Junge. Junge subsequently left Hitler's staff after requesting a post on the front line.

## SECRETARY



*In 1943, Traudl married Hitler's valet Hans Junge. Within a year, he'd been killed at the front.*

PHOTO: ULLSTEIN BILD

ruins and the remains of buildings. A dead horse lies in the middle of the white paving of the Wilhelmsplatz. But my feelings are deadened, I feel quite hollow.

## Tuesday, 24th April

Hitler gives orders to transform the Nazi parade ground's East-West axis (today's Straße des 17. Juni) into a makeshift runway.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** Those ... who were here by virtue of their services being indispensable, knew only too well that the only hope of saving our own skins would come after Hitler's death. Therefore we waited for it.

## Wednesday, 25th April

Red Army and US forces meet on a bridge over the Elbe at Torgau in Saxony. Germany has been cut in two. In Berlin, all hope is extinguished.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** I was glad to be constantly occupied. It helped me a little to forget the times.

## Thursday, 26th April

Göring's successor as Reichsmarschall is found. Field Marshal Ritter von Greim flies from Munich to Berlin to take up his post. Ace test pilot Hanna Reitsch flies him on the last leg of his journey.

**PILOT HANNA REITSCH:** Suddenly, from the ground, out of the shadows, from the tree-tops

themselves, leapt the very fires of Hell, concentrating from every quarter on us, seemingly us alone. Below, Russian tanks and soldiers were swarming among the trees. I could see clearly the men's faces, as rifles, tommy-guns and anti-tank weapons were raised and fired at us. We were haloed and flanked and underlined with innumerable and deadly little explosive puffs.

Then, suddenly, there was a rending crash – I saw a yellowy-white flame streak up beside the engine and, at the same time, Greim shouted that he was hit – an armour-piercing bullet had smashed through his right foot [and he] lay crumpled in his seat, unconscious... Again and again we were hit. With a spasm of terror, I caught sight of petrol running from both wing-tanks. An explosion, I thought, was inevitable, should have happened already. And still the plane answered the controls and still I remained untouched.

We were now approaching the Radio Tower and the evil-smelling, sulphurous air whirled thicker and thicker with smoke, dust and fumes. Visibility was almost nil. The ground-fire was slackening and the area seemed, at any rate, to be still in German hands.

Von Greim had meanwhile regained consciousness and, with great difficulty, I helped him out of the machine, which might at any moment be spotted and attacked. He sat down at the side of the road. Now we could only wait and wait, on the off-chance that some vehicle might come our way—we could only hope it would not be a Russian one.

**SECRETARY TRAUDL JUNGE:** Hanna Reitsch is a small, delicate, very feminine person, you'd never have thought she had such masculine courage. She wears the Iron Cross on her smooth black rollneck sweater. Greim limps into the bunker on one leg, leaning on her shoulder... Hanna Reitsch hurries to see the Führer. She must have been one of those women who adored Hitler unconditionally, without reservations.

## Friday, 27th April

The Red Army has reached Alexanderplatz. Speer is asked to explain why he has failed to fulfil Hitler's command to destroy the German factories.

“ Suddenly I feel something like hatred and helpless anger rise in me. I'm angry with the dead Führer.

*Traudl Junge,  
Hitler's secretary*

## WHITE FLAG

While the fighting continued in the centre of Berlin, it was peaceful in other districts.

PHOTO: ULLSTEIN BILD





**MINISTER OF ARMAMENTS ALBERT SPEER:** I felt considerable apprehension when I was led into Hitler's office deep underground. He was alone, received me frostily... and in a sharp, low voice immediately came to the point: "Bormann has given me a report on your conference with the Ruhr Gauleiters. You pressed them not to carry out my orders and declared that the war is lost. Are you aware of what must follow from that?"

As if he were reminded of something remote, his voice softened... and almost in the tone of a normal person he added: "If you were not my architect, I would take the measures that are called for in such a case."

### Saturday, 28th April

The Führerbunker is now almost cut off from the outside world. Hitler's staff listen to the BBC as it announces that SS leader Heinrich Himmler has held secret peace talks with Swedish diplomat Folke Bernadotte.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** For a moment Hitler lost his self-control. It was loud – I could hear his voice above the telephone calls I was dealing with: "Himmler of all people, Himmler of all people!"

The whole thing reminded me of his reaction to Hess's defection to Britain in 1941. Hitler called Hanna Reitsch and Ritter von Von Greim to him. They were to arrest Himmler.

**PILOT HANNA REITSCH:** Dispatch-riders reported that the Axis was clear of shell craters for 400 yards, but that the situation might alter at any moment. Though enemy searchlights were groping continually up and down the Axis we managed to take off without being spotted and headed towards the Brandenburg Gate... We flew on, undisturbed by spasmodic tracer fire, and in about a mile reached the welcoming protection of a cloud-bank.

### Sunday, 29th April

US troops reach Munich. In Italy, partisans kill Mussolini and his mistress. The news terrifies Hitler and he decides to take his fate into his own hands.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** Shortly after midnight I saw a man in the bunker whom I had never seen before. "Who is that then?" I asked. "That is the registrar."

In this manner I heard of the planned marriage of Hitler to Eva Braun... There were a few well-wishers present to toast the newlyweds [but] I remained at my workplace and considered how I should now greet Eva

when I met her. "Frau Hitler" – that did not seem possible.

**SECRETARY TRAUDL JUNG:** The Führer comes towards me ... "There's something I'd like you to take down from dictation." I sit down alone at the big table and wait... Then, suddenly, the Führer utters the first words. "My political testament." For a moment my hand trembles. Now, at last, I shall hear what we've been waiting for ... an explanation of what has happened, a confession, even a confession of guilt, or perhaps a justification... But my expectations are not fulfilled. In tones of indifference, almost mechanically, the Führer comes out with the explanations, accusations and demands that I, the German people and the whole world know already.

### Monday, 30th April

A few hundred metres from the Führerbunker, Soviet and German soldiers battle fiercely.

**SECRETARY TRAUDL JUNG:** [Hitler's adjutant, Otto] Günsche comes up to me. "Come on, the Führer wants to say goodbye." I rise and go out into the corridor... I vaguely realise there are other people there too. But all I really see is the figure of the Führer. He comes very slowly out of his room, stooping more than ever, stands in the open doorway and shakes hands with everyone. I feel his right hand warm in mine, he looks at me but he isn't seeing me ... He says something to me, but I don't hear it ... Only when Eva Braun comes over to me is the spell broken a little. She smiles and embraces me. "Please do try to get out. You may yet make your way through. And give Bavaria my love," she says, smiling but with a sob in her voice ... Like that, she follows the Führer into his room – and to her death. The heavy iron door closes.

**CHAUFFEUR ERICH KEMPKA:** I was in one of the less damaged rooms of the underground ▶

“When first employed in 1932 I dreamed of being his chauffeur and constant companion.

*Erich Kempka,  
Hitler's chauffeur*

### CHAUFFEUR

#### ERICH KEMPKA

Originally, Erich Kempka was a mechanic at the DKW car factory. In 1930, he joined the Nazi party and began working as a driver for high-ranking party members. Over the next four years, Kempka worked his way up to become Hitler's chauffeur. The post also gave him responsibility for Hitler's fleet of cars in an underground garage near the Führerbunker.



*Erich Kempka was Hitler's chauffeur for 11 years.*



## ALBERT SPEER

The unemployed architect Albert Speer attended a Nazi rally in Berlin in 1930 and was enthralled by Hitler. Over the years, he was assigned numerous projects by leading party members and the state. He was a close friend to Hitler and when Armaments Minister Fritz Todt died in a plane crash in 1942, Speer was appointed his successor.

## MINISTER



*The architect Speer became one of the key men in Hitler's government.*

“When heavy bombs exploded in the vicinity ... Hitler would give a start. What had become of the formerly fearless corporal of the First World War?”

*Albert Speer, Hitler's architect and armaments minister*

garages, having just arrived there from outside to supervise the change of the guard. At that moment my telephone rang... It was Günsche. His voice hoarse with excitement he said, “I must have 200 litres of petrol immediately.” At first I thought this was a bad joke and told him it was out of the question. Now he began shouting. “Petrol – Erich – petrol!” “OK, and why would you need a mere 200 litres of petrol?” “I cannot tell you on the phone.”

In great haste I authorised my deputy to take some men at once and siphon out what petrol could be found and bring it to the place ordered. Then I hurried by the quickest route over rubble to [Otto] Günsche, to find out what had happened.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** [Hitler's servant, Heinz] Linge placed his ear to the door of the anteroom. He and Günsche opened the first door to the anteroom. They advanced slowly to Hitler's study door. Nobody drew breath. The second door was opened. I took a few steps forward and craned my neck.

My glance fell first on Eva. She was seated with her legs drawn up, her head inclined towards Hitler. Her shoes were under the sofa. Near her – I cannot remember whether on the sofa or the armchair near it – the dead Hitler.

## PILOT

## HANNA REITSCH

Even as a child, Reitsch was fascinated by flying and got her pilot's licence at 20 years of age. During the 1930s, she set several glider records that led to a career as a test pilot. Among other things, she flew history's first helicopter, the Focke-Wulf Fw 61, and the rocket Me 163. In 1945, she was ready to rescue Hitler from Berlin by chopper.



*The fearless Hanna Reitsch was a staunch Nazi and received two Iron Crosses.*

His eyes were open and staring, his head had fallen forward slightly.

**CHAUFFEUR ERICH KEMPKA:** There were twenty steps up to the bunker exit. I had not reckoned with the weight and my strength failed. I had to stop. Halfway up Günsche hurried to assist me, and together we carried the body of Eva Hitler into the open... Günsche and I lay Eva Hitler beside her husband. In the enormous excitement of the moment we put her at an angle to him. Russian shells were exploding around us – it seemed that their artillery had suddenly doubled its bombardment.

I rushed back to the shelter of the bunker, stopping for a moment, panting, waiting for the next salvoes to arrive. Then I seized a canister of petrol, ran out again and placed it near the two bodies. Quickly I bent low to place Hitler's left arm closer to his body. His untidy hair fluttered in the wind. I took off the cap of the petrol can. Shells exploded close by, spattering us with earth and dust ... Again we ran to the bunker entrance for cover, our nerves stretched to breaking point. Tensely we waited for the shelling in our area to die down before pouring petrol over the corpses. Then I ran out speedily and grabbed the canister. I was trembling as I poured the contents over the two bodies, and repeatedly told myself that I could not do it, but I was conscious of it being Hitler's last order.

How should we light the petrol? I protested at a suggestion to ignite the bodies using a hand grenade. My glance fell on a large piece of rag... It took only a second to open the petrol tin and soak the rag with the contents. “A match!” Dr Goebbels took a box of matches from his pocket and handed it to me. I set light to the rag and once it was afire lobbed it towards the petrol-soaked corpses... A bright flame flared up ... Slowly the fire began to nibble at the corpses.

The act of burning the corpses lasted from about 1400 until 1930 hrs.

**SECRETARY TRAUDL JUNGE:** The door to Hitler's room is still open... Eva's little revolver is lying on the table with a pink chiffon scarf beside it, and I see the brass case of the poison capsule glinting on the floor next to Frau Hitler's chair... Suddenly I feel something like hatred and helpless anger rise in me. I'm angry with the dead Führer.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** What now? Soon we had a consensus: negotiate with the Russians. We had to connect a line to their field telephones. Linesman Gretz appeared with a giant drum of cable, pointed to two plug points on the junction box and said... “Now I'll go



over to the Russians." The Red Army was already in Zimmer-Strasse, not four hundred metres away... I plugged in the cable [and] heard a Russian voice on the other end. "Moment, moment," I said and connected the call to General Krebs, who was fluent in Russian.

## Tuesday, 1st May

The Red Army celebrate the capture of the Reichstag in Berlin, while the Americans occupy the Austrian city of Braunau, where Hitler was born. Joseph Goebbels, Germany's new Reich Chancellor, rejects the outcome of General Krebs' peace talks. In the Führerbunker, many prepare to escape – others choose death.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** Towards five in the afternoon Frau Goebbels appeared at the telephone switchboard with all six children from the ante-bunker below... Magda Goebbels then began changing one after the other into the same type of long white nightdress... She combed their hair and caressed the children gently. The nine-year-old Helga was crying. Frau Goebbels spoke softly and seriously with the children but was very tender with them... I knew this was the final parting of a mother from her children.

**SECRETARY TRAUDL JUNG:** We sit around and wait for evening... Goebbels walks restlessly up and down, smoking, like a hotel proprietor waiting discreetly and in silence for the last guests to leave the bar. He has stopped complaining and ranting. So the time has come. We all shake hands with him in farewell. He wishes me good luck, with a twisted smile. "You may get through," he says softly, in heartfelt tones. But I shake my head doubtfully... One by one, we leave these scenes of horror. I pass Hitler's door for the last time.

**PEACE IN BERLIN**  
Berlin surrendered on 2nd May and Soviet soldiers gathered to celebrate at the Brandenburg Gate.

POLEFOTO/TOFFOTO

## Wednesday, 2nd May, 1945

The Goebbels have killed their children and committed suicide. Berlin surrenders. 300,000 Soviets are dead. German losses are unknown.

**BODYGUARD ROCHUS MISCH:** Goebbels gave me a sudden look as if he were seeing me for the first time... "The war is lost ... We knew how to live, and now we have to know how to die. I do not need you any longer, Misch."

Then he gave me his hand, something he had never done before ... For a moment I felt relief. I thought no more of Goebbels or Hitler. I went back to the switchboard and plucked out all the plugs... I was finally finished here. Now to get out.

## FURTHER READING

Eyewitnesses to the downfall consists of quotes from five autobiographies.

- Traudl Junge: *Until the Final Hour: Hitler's Last Secretary*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003
- Rochus Misch: *Hitler's Last Witness: The Memoirs of Hitler's Bodyguard*, Frontline Books, 2017
- Erich Kempka: *I Was Hitler's Chauffeur*, Frontline Books, 2012
- Albert Speer: *Inside The Third Reich*, W&N, 2009
- Hanna Reitsch: *The Sky My Kingdom: Memoirs of the Famous German World War II Test Pilot*, Casemate Publishers, 2012

# Life continued after Hitler's downfall

The victors didn't believe the accounts of Hitler's suicide and tortured several of the eyewitnesses to find out where he was.

**ROCHUS MISCH** escaped the Führerbunker on 2nd May, but was soon caught. Stalin didn't believe Hitler was dead, and had Misch tortured to be sure of the truth. He returned to his wife in West Berlin in 1953 and bought a paint shop.

**TRAUDL JUNG** lived under a false name in Berlin for four weeks before she was arrested. Soviet intelligence interrogated her, but let her go after a few months. Later, she found work as both a secretary and journalist.

**ERICH KEMPKA** reached home in Bavaria before being captured by US counter intelligence. Exposed to

harsh interrogation and released after two years, Kempka later became a test driver for Porsche.

**ALBERT SPEER** assisted Hitler's successor, Karl Dönitz, in the last days of the war. The war crimes tribunal in Nuremberg sentenced him to 20 years in prison.

**HANNA REITSCH** was in Austria when she was taken into US custody for 18 months. Later, she resumed work as a pilot.

**OTTO GÜNSCHE AND HEINZ LINGE**, respectively personal adjutant and valet for Hitler, ended up in Soviet captivity, where they were subjected to torture. Both were released in 1955. Günsche later worked in pharmaceuticals and Linge became a salesman.



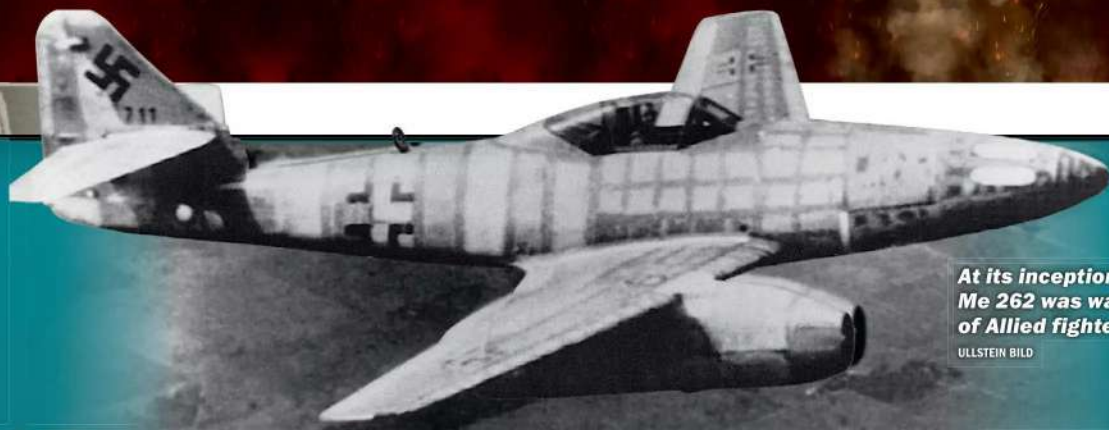


*The Allies did not win the war because they were the strongest force, but because Hitler was a hopeless military strategist. In fact, the Führer made so many foolish decisions that the US and British generals often called Hitler their best ally.*

BY MARTIN LANDIN

# HITLER'S 10 biggest blunders





At its inception, the Me 262 was way ahead of Allied fighter jets.

ULLSTEIN BILD

# 10 Used advanced jet fighters as bog-standard bombers

**Hitler had a superior fighter in the Messerschmitt Me 262, but despite expert advice to the contrary, he insisted on using it as a bomber.**

The Messerschmitt Me 262 was ahead of its time in many ways, not least because it was the first fighter in history to benefit from jet engines. With a length of just 10.6 m and a top speed of 900 km/h, the German-developed jet could out-maneuvre the best Allied fighters of the period. In short, the Me 262 was just what the Luftwaffe needed in 1943 when the war was about to turn in the Allies' favour.

Impressed with the German-engineered prototype, Hitler ordered the lightning-fast aircraft into production – as a bomber. The developers protested that their wonder machine was wasted dropping bombs, but Hitler insisted. The result was a disaster. Even under

controlled conditions, the German pilots missed their targets by around a mile because the Me 262 was simply too fast for the pilots to accurately calculate the bomb's drop point.

By the time Hitler sent the planes into battle as fighter jets in 1944, the Germans had already lost the war.

## HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★★★★  
Had the Me 262 been used as a fighter aircraft in 1943, the Germans could have taken control of European airspace.

## SPITFIRE WAS OUTCLASSSED

MESSERSCHMITT ME 262	SPITFIRE MK VB
Type: <b>Fighter</b>	Fighter
Engine: <b>2 x Junkers B-1-turbojet</b>	1 x Rolls-Royce Merlin 45
Top speed: <b>900 km/h</b>	595 km/h
Range: <b>1,050 km</b>	805 km
Ceiling: <b>11,450 m</b>	11,125 m
Rate of climb: <b>1,200 m/min</b>	792 m/min

**British civilians paid dearly for Hitler's desire for revenge bombings.**

TOPFOTO/POLFOTO



## HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★★★★  
The Battle of Britain was Hitler's first defeat and gave the Brits faith that victory was possible.

# 9 Gave the Royal Air Force time to recover

In June 1940, Hitler ordered an air offensive to prepare the way for an invasion of Britain. The Luftwaffe set about destroying the RAF's ability to resist. In a series of highly effective strikes, the Germans bombed command centres, fuel stores, aircraft factories and runways. In August 1940, the Luftwaffe was well on the way to achieving its goal – until Hitler interfered.

During an attack on a military target, a Luftwaffe bomber strayed off target and accidentally dropped its payload over central London. The British bombed Berlin in response. Furious, Hitler had the Luftwaffe begin a prolonged campaign of bombing British cities. This gave the RAF much-needed respite that eventually enabled its pilots to gain air supremacy over the British Isles.



## 8 Kept German women out of factories

While millions of Allied women in helped keep their countries' industries going during the war, Hitler believed that women were unsuitable for factory work. Instead, they were expected to concentrate on caring for their homes and children. The Führer's conservative outlook led to a huge labour shortage at German factories when men were called to the front line. Hitler tried to keep his industry going with forced labour, but that only replaced 20 percent of the lost workforce. As the war progressed and resources dwindled still

further, Hitler permitted a small number of German women to contribute to the war effort by becoming telephone operators, nurses and secretaries. Others joined the workforce as SS guards in concentration camps.

### HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★★★★

Allowing women to work wouldn't have helped Germany win, but it could have delayed its defeat.



In the US, special posters encouraged women to work to help the war effort.

AKG IMAGES

## 7 Tied his own air force's hands

On the night of 31 May 1942, the RAF sent around 1,000 bombers into Germany under the cover of darkness. The Luftwaffe were unable to detect the enemy aircraft at night and the RAF destroyed 13,000 buildings in Cologne on the first night alone.

The British continued to attack in this way for months – until German fighter planes began to hit the bombers as they landed at British airfields. This countermeasure worked beautifully, then Hitler stuck his nose in. He cancelled the successful ambushes and instead ordered that enemy aircraft be targeted over Germany, so that his people could take heart from seeing the British planes being shot down.

### HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★★★★

Hitler's nonsensical order allowed the British to bomb Germany throughout the war.

## 6 Went to war with old weapons

Hitler's confidence in his own abilities as a military strategist was cemented in the first years of the war. The annexation of Austria, the occupation of Czechoslovakia, the campaign in Poland, the lightning occupations of Denmark and Norway and the surrender of France in 1940 merely confirmed what Hitler had known all along: he was a tactical genius who knew better than his overly cautious command staff.

Buoyed by his early military successes – most of which were due to the enemy's hesitancy and ill-prepared armies – Hitler cancelled almost all German weapon programmes. The war could be won with existing weapons, Hitler insisted. But then the war really got going, and two years later the Nazis' weapons were becoming outdated in comparison to the enemy's.

Hitler ordered weapon development to resume, but two years had been lost and several key designers had died in the interim. Although the Germans still manufactured some groundbreaking weapons, none were produced in sufficient numbers – and those that did come into use suffered a host of teething troubles.



A few years into the war, Germany's weapons started to become outdated.

SZ PHOTO/SCANPIX

### HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★★★★

If weapon development hadn't been interrupted, the Germans might have kept the upper hand in the war.



# 5 Refused to give up Stalingrad

German generals pleaded to make a tactical retreat from Stalingrad, but the Führer insisted they stay.

In December 1941, the German invasion of the Soviet Union had stalled, and Hitler gradually began to fear a repeat of Napoleon's disastrous defeat at Moscow in 1812. In order to force matters, he appointed himself commander-in-chief of the army.

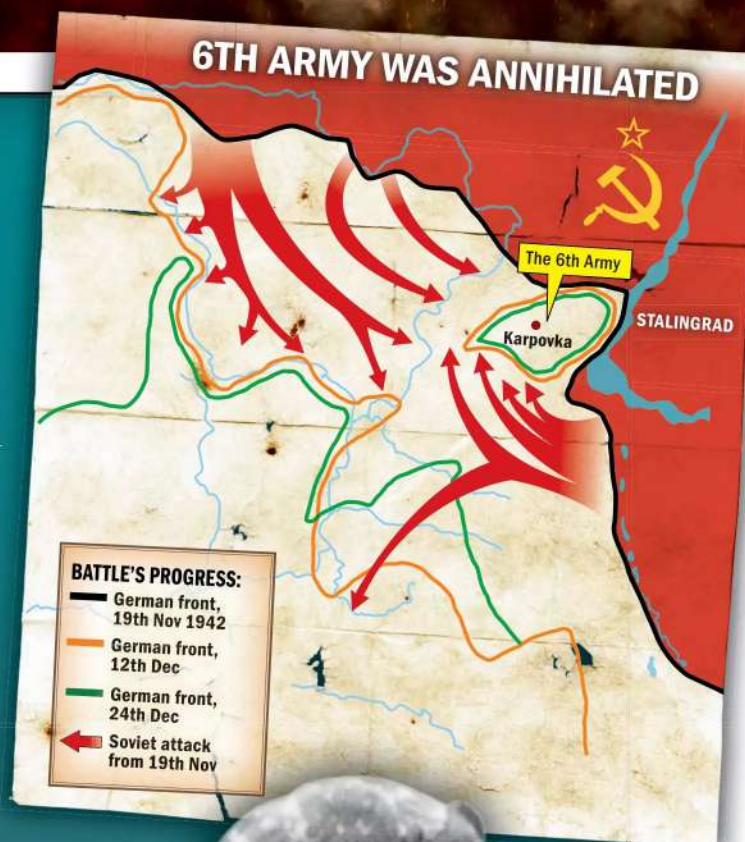
A few days later, Hitler issued an order for the German troops to stand firm at all costs – despite several of his most experienced generals proving on several occasions that a tactical retreat could lead to victory when facing a numerically superior enemy. Typically, such retreats could swiftly be turned into counterattacks once the chasing enemy's supply lines became too thinly stretched.

The standing order cost tens of thousands of German soldiers their lives, but Hitler firmly believed that his soldiers could win victory through sheer force of will. Half a year later,

Hitler had still not learned from his mistake and once again refused to allow troops to fall back during the 6th Army's attempt to occupy Stalingrad (now Volgograd). Hitler told his generals to hold their position despite them warning him that they were in danger of being encircled and overrun. He didn't listen. The 6th Army thus had the dubious honour of becoming the first German army to be surrounded and completely annihilated. The fighting at Stalingrad cost the Germans more than 180,000 men.

**Russian troops annihilated the German 6th Army at Stalingrad.**

AKG/SCANPIX & GETTY IMAGES



**HOW BIG AN ERROR?**  
★★★★★  
Hitler's irrational order to stand firm destroyed the German army's main advantage: mobility.



## 4 Waiting for an invasion that was already underway

At dawn on 6th June 1944, Allied aircraft bombed German defences in Normandy and tens of thousands of Allied soldiers waded ashore. While one of history's greatest invasions was underway, Hitler was at home sleeping. He didn't wake until 14.00 – even though he had known that an invasion was imminent. Hitler was convinced the D-Day landings were just a diversionary move. For weeks, Hitler

failed to send reinforcements to Normandy because he was waiting for the real invasion. In the meantime, the Allies gained a foothold in France and were soon on their way to Paris and Germany.

### HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★★★★

Hitler's insistence on micromanaging his generals prevented them from driving back the enemy after D-Day.

The French in Normandy cheered on the Allies.

AGE/SCANPIX



### HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★★★★

Without the Dunkirk veterans, the war would most likely have been over for the Brits.

365,000 British soldiers were evacuated across the English Channel because Hitler hesitated.



## 3 Failed to obliterate the British Army at Dunkirk

In May 1940, German tanks and soldiers stormed across the border and through the Netherlands, Belgium and northern France. In just ten days, Hitler's armoured units had reached the English Channel, pushing the British army into a corner of the coastal town of Dunkirk. Nazi General Ewald von Kleist, who was a few kilometres away with three armoured and two infantry divisions, believed that Dunkirk could be captured in less than a day. Then, suddenly, Hitler ordered all German units to halt. With the German war machine on pause, the British were able to conduct a large-scale evacuation. After nine days it was over: 365,000 soldiers had escaped across the Channel and Hitler lost the chance to wipe out the British army.

MEYERS/SCANPIX

AGE/SCANPIX

## 2 Declared war on the USA

The day after Japan's attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in

December 1941, Ambassador Hiroshi Oshima eagerly tried to persuade Reichsminister of Foreign Affairs Joachim von Ribbentrop to declare war on the United States, but von Ribbentrop hesitated. The minister believed that entering into a war with the US would be suicidal for Germany.

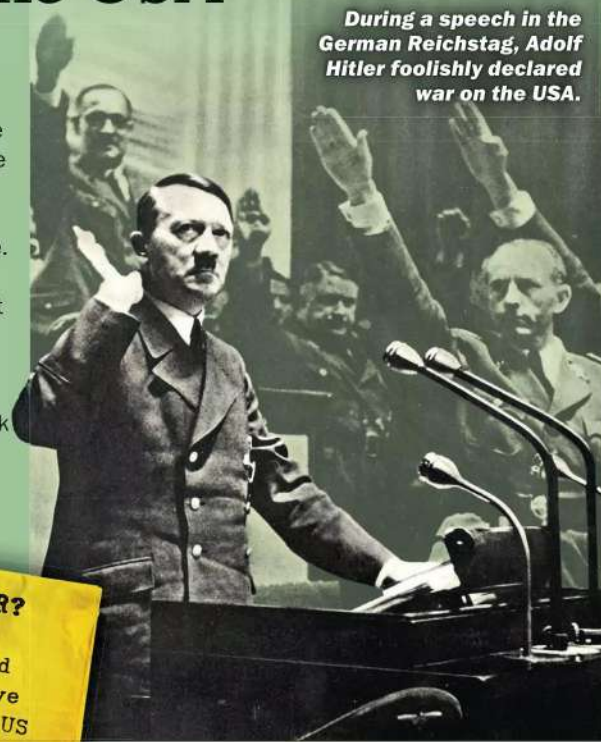
Hitler disagreed. The Führer considered Japan as an invincible ally – and once the Empire had defeated the United States, it could turn its attention on the Soviet Union. Then Stalin would be forced to fight on two fronts, and with the

Soviet troops more thinly spread, Hitler would be able to capture Moscow with ease.

Three days later, Hitler made a declaration of war against the United States, fully expecting that most US forces would be deployed against the Japanese. To Hitler's surprise, President Franklin D Roosevelt sent most of his troops to Europe.

Even worse for Hitler, the troops Stalin had been holding in reserve to fight off any attack from Japan were now available to fight the Germans.

During a speech in the German Reichstag, Adolf Hitler foolishly declared war on the USA.



### HOW BIG AN ERROR?

★★★★★

If he hadn't declared war, Hitler could have avoided fighting the US for two or three years.



# Invaded Russia in summer uniforms

The invasion of the Soviet Union – the largest in history – would be over in a few months, Hitler thought. He was wrong.

# 1

"We only have to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down," Hitler said before invading the Soviet Union in June 1941. His neighbour had a

larger army, but the Germans were better organised and had more experienced officers. Hitler's disdain for the Soviets led him to believe the invasion would be over in a matter of months.

Initially, the invasion went well: the Soviets were surprised by Hitler's attack. Five Soviet armies and over 2,000 aircraft were destroyed in the first week alone. But after four weeks, German supplies were exhausted, and the lightning invasion ground to a halt.

Meanwhile, in Berlin, Hitler refused his generals' advice to

send troops directly to Moscow – a hub for Red Army supplies. Despite their protests, Hitler insisted on splitting his forces and launching an attack towards the Caucasus oil fields and the resource-rich Ukraine and Baltic states.

This meant that the Nazis only reached Moscow in December 1941 – just in time for the infamous Russian winter to paralyse their troops who were still wearing their summer uniforms. The German quartermasters had not planned for a icy campaign in Russia and therefore did not have enough winter uniforms to help their men survive the extreme temperatures, which often dipped to -30 degrees Celsius.

Hitler's arrogant dismissal of both the Red Army and the Russian winter was a decisive factor in the war turning against the Axis powers. After their defeat in the Soviet Union, the war was truly lost for the Nazis.

STEEL HELMET protected a soldier's head during the fighting, but provided no protection against the cold.

JACKET was made of wool and was extremely durable – but not very warm in winter.

TROUSERS were high-waisted and made of wool. They were quite practical in summer, but useless in winter.

**HOW BIG AN ERROR?**  
★★★★★  
The invasion might have been over before winter set in if Hitler had listened to his generals.

## FURTHER READING

• James P. Duffy: *Hitler Slept Late and Other Blunders That Cost Him the War*, Praeger Publishers Inc, 1991 • Ronald Lewin: *Hitler's Mistakes*, Morrow New York, 1984 • William L. Shirer: *Rise And Fall Of The Third Reich*, Arrow, 1991

BOOTS were leather and went up to the knees. Unlike the Russians' boots, the Germans' were not intended for use in snow.

German soldiers had to be inventive to survive the biting Russian cold.



## INVASION OF THE SOVIET UNION

	GERMANY 	SOVIET UNION 
Soldiers*	3,800,000	5,500,000
Tanks	4,300	15-25,000
Aircraft	4,389	11,357
Artillery	7,200	34,700
Horses	750,000	Unknown
Dead	> 800,000	> 4,000,000
Wounded	> 600,000	Unknown

\* The numbers of combatants, vehicles and dead are all uncertain.



Hitler planned to capture the Soviet Union in five weeks. As such, the German troops were not prepared for the winter.

AKG IMAGES



---

# THIRD REICH AT WAR

---

**Publishing Director:** Niels Jespersen

**Editor-in-chief:** Hanne-Luise Danielsen

**Production:** Stephanie Kjær Poulsen

**Translators:** Nick Peers, Karen Levell, Katharine Davies, and Toni Baxter

**Cover design:** Sidse Lange

**Cover:** Scherl/Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo/  
Ritzau Scanpix, Geller/Bundesarchiv, Kleiner/  
Bundesarchiv, iStock, ullstein bild/Getty Images,  
Library and archives canada, Shutterstock.

**Bringing History to Life is published by:**

Bonnier Publications International AS,  
PB 543, 1411 Kolbotn, Norway.

**ISSN:** 2445-6659

**Printed by:** Poligrafijas Grupa Mukusala, Ltd.

**Marketing/Distribution UK and Export:**

Marketforce (UK), 3rd Floor, 161 Marsh Wall,  
Canary Wharf, London E14 9AP  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 3787 9001  
[www.marketforce.co.uk](http://www.marketforce.co.uk)

**Licensing and Syndication:**

Regina Erak – [regina.erak@globalworks.co.uk](mailto:regina.erak@globalworks.co.uk)  
Tel: +44 (0)7753 811622

All rights reserved. Reproduction in any manner  
or form is strictly prohibited without the prior  
written consent of the publisher. Whilst every  
care is taken with the material submitted to this  
bookazine, no responsibility can be accepted for  
loss or damage. Whilst every effort has been

made to contact all copyright holders, the  
sources of some pictures that may be used are  
varied and, in many cases, obscure.

The publisher is happy to make good in future  
editions any error or omissions brought to their  
attention. The publication of any quotes or  
illustrations for which authorisation has not been  
given is unintentional.

**BONNIER**  
Publications International



Printed matter  
3041 0876







# Third Reich at War

Hitler and his Nazis dreamed of building the strongest empire in the world: a Third Reich that would last a thousand years. A fanatical army promised to deliver the Führer's fantasy, but after a glorious first year, the war began to take its toll on Germany and its leader. Hitler was making more and more blunders. New superweapons and even an atomic bomb were under development, but it was all too late to save the Nazis from defeat.



## BLITZKRIEG PHASES

Heinz Guderian devised a new military tactic: the four-phase blitzkrieg.



## DUEL IN THE SKIES

Hitler was certain that the Luftwaffe could crush British resistance.



## MUST-WIN TANK CLASH

The Nazis were counting on their new tanks to deliver victory at Kursk.